

THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE GAY
AND BISEXUAL MALE SUBCULTURE IN
OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA,
1889-2005

By

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Chapter I
The Historiography of American LGBT Sexuality:
Oklahoma City's Place in the Debate

The field of U.S. lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) history coalesced after 1970, the product of freer attitudes about sexuality in general and the revolution that was social history in particular, especially its emphasis on crafting history from “the bottom up.” It might be said that the field passed through three distinct phases. The first phase, encompassing much of the pre-1976 work, was anecdotal, autobiographical, and written by members of the gay and lesbian rights movement. Topics usually centered on the macrohistory of being gay in the United States, ignoring how long-range historical trends affected gay communities, or whether communities existed at all. Martin Duberman’s *Black Mountain*, an exploration of the North Carolina artist commune that produced Robert Creeley and Anna and Josef Albers, provided a glimpse into a world with less rigid sexual boundaries. In that work Duberman also first admitted that he was gay, no small feat for an academic at that juncture. Jonathan Ned Katz’s *Gay American History* was one of the finest modern collections of narratives and documents by gay Americans about their history.¹ Despite their shortcomings, these

¹ Martin Duberman, *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community* (New York 1972); Duberman discusses the suffocating atmosphere in which he and other gay scholars worked throughout the 1950s, and his struggle to accept his sexuality in the face of hostile medical and academic opinions in his *Cures: A Gay Man's Odyssey* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), introduction, 27, 123; See also Jonathan Ned Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A., A Documentary* (New York,

early examples by pioneers in the field encouraged gays and lesbians to be more aware of their history, and it inspired graduate students to seriously study aspects of homosexual history.

By the early 1980s the field entered a second phase, during which several seminal works appeared that put American sexuality in the broader fabric of American history. Academic historians who focused on homosexual history, many of whom previously found it difficult to secure jobs,² brought the field into a sharper theoretical focus, touching on issues like economics, resistance, victimization, and politics. These works borrowed heavily from the impressive body of work being completed on women's history, which was energized by feminism and the women's liberation movement.³ Gay scholars took from their debates the belief that issues related to gender could augment historical analysis -- just as the female perspective and experience enriched the larger American historical narrative, so too would the gay experience. Academics immersed

1976). Although this work was less theoretical, Katz's later work made him one of the leading social constructionists of the Foucault school of thought on sexuality: sexuality is socially constructed and historically specific.

² John D'Emilio, "Not a Simple Matter: Gay History and Gay Historians," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 2 (September 1989): 435-442. D'Emilio found that despite placing over 50 applications with universities, after publishing a major work, after graduating from an Ivy League school and training under an eminent American historian, he received only one substantial job consideration.

³ Examples include Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century Americans," *Signs* (Autumn 1975), 1-29; Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movements and the New Left* (New York: Knopf, 1979).

themselves in the history of sexuality, writing books, articles, theses, and dissertations on a wide range of topics.⁴

John D’Emilio, who trained at Columbia under William Leuchtenburg, turned his 1982 dissertation into the powerful *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, a work that continues to set the standard in the field. D’Emilio argued that gay subcultures developed during the late nineteenth century in response to structural changes in the American economy and society that made living outside of the traditional family sphere possible. In this regard, D’Emilio is rather Marxist, seeing a linear progression in queer subculture formation -- from desire, to acts, to identities, to communities, and finally to movements. Indeed, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* is steeped in the concepts of “class” and “consciousness,” and he clearly views sexuality as being socially constructed.⁵ According to D’Emilio, changes began in the late Victorian Era, when the perception of homosexuality shifted from being a *behavior* descriptor to a matter of *personal* identity. In larger cities like New York, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., and St. Louis, a number of drinking establishments, parks, bathhouses, and public theaters became key socialization centers for gay and bisexual men after 1900. Many of these

⁴ Two early examples include Salvatore Licata, “Gay Power: a History of the American Gay Movement, 1908-1974.” Ph.D. diss, University of Southern California, 1978, and Ramon Gutierrez, “Marriage, Sex, and Family: Social Change in Colonial New Mexico, 1690-1846.” Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1980.

⁵ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of A Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Marc Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography,” *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (2005): 605-625. Stein believes that D’Emilio, like many scholars steeped in the language of the 1970s feminist political concepts of “consciousness-raising” and Marxist notions of “class,” was heavily influenced by the work of E.P. Thompson, especially his massive tome, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1964).

institutions prospered because they were located in the “rougher” parts of town, areas abandoned by respectable businessmen and residents as the cities expanded, and they grew to the point that many establishments “specialized,” offering distinct entertainments based upon class or sexual interest. By World War I, such institutions were augmented by professional associations, literary groups, and networks of private socialization that catered to gay and lesbian residents.⁶

Central to D’Emilio’s analysis, however, were the massive economic and social disruptions wrought by World War II, which culminated the century-long spread of capitalism, industrialization, and urbanization, and this proved to be a huge catalyst in the formation of collective gay life. While more repressive, the post-war years also witnessed significant growth of urban gay subcultures and fledgling political organizations like the Mattachine Society. Although the Stonewall incident was an important spark for the modern gay rights movement for D’Emilio, he paid greater homage to the years of work by other activists who made that spark possible. Thus the post-1969 movement must be viewed as the culmination of Homophile efforts in the 1940s and 1950s, which were energized and made possible by structural changes in American society inaugurated by World War II. The notion that pre-Stonewall gay Americans lived in “silence, invisibility, and isolation” was simply incorrect for D’Emilio.⁷

Building on D’Emilio’s work, Martin Duberman released *About Time* in 1986, a collection of primary documents and essays by a wide range of gay, lesbian, political, and educational figures. Duberman illustrated that gay and lesbian Americans had a history,

⁶D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, introduction, 1, 12-13.

that it existed in a wide range of printed materials, both public and private, and that LGBT studies could sustain itself as a field of productive historical inquiry. *About Time* included excerpts from such resources as the diaries of eighteenth and nineteenth-century gay men and women, Alfred Kinsey's study and his letters to colleagues, and articles reprinted by police detectives regarding the arrest of sodomy suspects. Duberman followed *About Time* with an important anthology two years later, a project on which he shared editing duties with George Chauncey and Martha Vicinus. *Hidden From History* included almost thirty essays that touched on the sexuality of everyone from seventeenth-century Samurai and Kabuki in Japan, to South African miners, to World War I sailors. These were huge works in the late 1980s, encompassing as they did the primary materials previously ignored by the historical profession.⁸

The field of LGBT sexual history made large strides by the end of the 1980s, with research on bars, prominent homosexuals, World War II, and repression dominating the historical discourse, but syntheses designed to place sexuality into the larger rubric of American history lagged behind. That changed with the publication of John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman's *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, arguably the single most important work released on the history of sexuality to date. D'Emilio and Freedman showed that the history of sexuality in the United States did not follow strict progression from repression to liberation, ignorance to wisdom, and intolerance to liberalism. Rather, over the last three hundred years, changes in the meaning and place

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Martin Duberman, *About Time: Exploring the Gay Past* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); Martin Duberman, George Chauncey, and Martha Vicinus, *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: Meridian Press, 1990).

of sexuality in American life paralleled changes in the economy, the family, and politics. In particular, the authors defined American sexuality in explicitly political terms, and they noted that three critical patterns recurred. First, political movements that seek to change sexual ideas and mores flourish when an older political system is in disarray and a new one is forming. Second, sexuality becomes political when WASP male authorities attempt to define female and homosexual sexual boundaries and women and homosexuals resist these proscriptions. Third, the politics of sexuality respond to both real and symbolic issues. This explains why attempts to regulate prostitution increased as more immigrants came to the United States and why African-American men were lynched in the South for rape as economic and political competition between blacks and whites became acute.⁹ Now in its eighth printing, *Intimate Matters* remains only one of two full-length syntheses of new work on sexuality since 1975.¹⁰

Freedman and D'Emilio provided an excellent synthesis of social and cultural forces and their impacts upon sexuality, but scholars from outside of the history profession---English and sociology in particular---provided a quasi-psychological and philosophical perspective. In 1990, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick redefined the concept of the “closet” and argued that it was not some mystical baggage that gays cast off after Stonewall, nor was it of recent origins. Essentially, Sedgwick searched for a middle ground between the two dominant philosophical approaches to studying sexuality then at work – the essentialist and the social constructionist. The essentialist approach argues

⁹ John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

¹⁰ A smaller, provocative summary that charts same-sex history only is Leila J. Rupp, *A Desired Past: A Short History of Same-Sex Love in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1999).

that sexuality is biologically constructed. Popular with gay rights activists for many years, essentialism provides the basis of gay identity politics – namely, that gay people have always existed, suffered abuse from their community, and thus deserve amelioration. The social constructionist theory holds that the “homosexual,” as a distinct species, is of recent origins and grew out of the Victorian-era medical and academic discourses that studied a wide range of sexual deviance. At that juncture, according to proponents like Michel Foucault, sexual acts once described merely as an aspect of personal behavior came to be viewed as a fundamental personality trait, and thus a new sexual identity emerged, which in turn codified a hetero-homo dichotomy that dominated Americans understanding of sexuality since.¹¹

For Sedgwick, both approaches seemed correct, and incorrect, at the same time--- the closet was one of the only things giving consistency to gay culture and identity in the twentieth century. The *Epistemology of the Closet* was a very dense and influential deconstructionist work that is part literary criticism, part history, and part political science. Sedgwick argued that almost every facet of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture split along a hetero-homo sexual dynamic. This so-called Great Paradigm Shift started in the late 19th century, was “decidedly male,” and permeated the entire cultural milieu. Sedgwick believed that sexual categories came into vogue in Europe and the United States during the last third of the nineteenth century, and she used the literary works of Melville, Nietzsche, Proust, James, and Wilde to trace that development. The use of the word “homosexual” predated the use of the word “heterosexual,” implying that before the 1890s sexuality, as a defining aspect of an

¹¹ Vicki Eaklor, “Learning from History: A Queer Problem.” *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity* 3 (July 1998), 196-197.

individual's life and worth, was not salient. After 1900 sexuality, like gender, became assignable. This process occurred at a time when power relations between genders and nations were in flux via the growth of the modern women's rights movement and the maelstrom of political and diplomatic discontent wrought by events leading to World War I. The categorization of sexuality and devaluation of homosexuality emerged as a logical step in the process to redefine the Western social and cultural order following these challenges. The explosion of psychological, legal, medical, and literary discourses refined the sexual types and codified the hetero-homo dynamic. These discourses contributed to the "otherness" of the homosexual, a negative evolution that culminated in such things as a "homosexual panic" defense of the 1980s.¹²

Jonathan Ned Katz supported Kosofsky, D'Emilio, and other scholars' assumptions regarding the social construction of homosexuality. In the *Invention of Heterosexuality* Katz argued that the codification of heterosexuality as normative sexuality resulted from the evolving opinions and expectations regarding the relationships between men and women and men with each other. Scientists like Sigmund Freud and German psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and later, Alfred Kinsey, by publishing their "expert" opinions in medical journals and dictionaries all over the world, added legitimacy to the evolving concepts of gender, sexuality, and their categorization. During the nineteenth century, the social order was not split into the "homo" and "hetero" dichotomy so common today. Katz thus questioned the authenticity of expectations

¹² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

Americans hold regarding gender and provided a compelling critique of cherished beliefs about sexuality.¹³

Cultural historian Siobahn Sommerville paralleled the changing attitudes about race in the United States with the evolving conceptualizations of sexuality, postulating that race was just as salient as politics, economics, or philosophy in early twentieth-century transformations. Sommerville described the rise of race control and the classification of sexuality, post-1880, as parallel events. Specifically, she argued that the “negotiation of the color line” shaped and was shaped by newly emerging notions of sexual identity proffered by writers Pauline Hopkins, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and a wide range of scientific and political discourses on sexuality and race. Particularly interesting was her argument that the “invert” classification, a sexually intermediate type halfway between pure male and pure female, sprang from the methods and conclusions mobilized by racial science in its descriptions of mulattos and other “half-breeds.” Yet, by the 1920s, the new model of homosexuality supplanted the earlier model of gender inversion, and it left no room for intermediate types. For Sommerville, this new polarization of bodies and focus on desires reflected a similar, simultaneous shift in racial thinking. The cultural figure of the mulatto gave way to a new vision of the races as natural opposites, and increasing numbers of legal and social mechanisms prevented people of different races from intermingling. Thus the emergence of new sexual categories mirrored the hardening of the color line.¹⁴

¹³ Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995).

¹⁴ Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). This is a very ambitious and compelling work, as books that treat race and sexuality

By the early 1990s, scholars specializing in the field of sexual history had produced some impressive works detailing the place of homosexuality in the larger American historical narrative. However, the relatively small number of scholars specializing in the field meant that the same people wrote much the same thing for a wide range of books, articles, and compendiums. In many ways, the love that dared not speak its name now would not shut up. The second phase in the historiography of sexuality was necessary and useful, especially for adding a theoretical dimension to the debate. Works in this phase focused on the convergence of specific factors---economic, urban, political, structural, and even international forces---and the roles they played in the development of gay and lesbian subcultures in the United States, at large. But missing were local studies and community studies of greater depth, those that might challenge or support the excellent meta-narratives developed by D'Emilio and others.

A third phase began in the early 1990s, and works appeared that described gay culture and gender issues in relation to other community factors, what might truly be called the social history of homosexuality. Book-length community studies appeared, histories that got to the heart of the queer social, political, economic, and sexual world where it mattered most -- right outside of the protagonists' front doors. In fact, works that appeared over the last two decades or so focused almost exclusively on state and

simultaneously are in short supply. Her use of texts is dangerous---it makes the work highly selective, a slave to its time frame, and regional (Southern). The author's readings indicate that both systems of differentiation and classification existed simultaneously for some sexual/racial groups for some time post-1900, something that questions just how much of a "shift" took place and how both systems were "intertwined." Also, the author's tendency to see sexual hierarchies and racial hierarchies as analogous (her comparison of the mulatto and "invert" as being similar conceptual categories) is clearly inappropriate, given the wide range of sexualized and racialized categories that her sources describe. One might also question whether this "hardening" took place in the 1920s or was already well under way by the 1890s.

local issues, and many tested the sturdy hypothesis offered by D'Emilio in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*.¹⁵

In 1990, Allan Berube produced one of the best social histories written in the last twenty years when *Coming Out Under Fire* appeared. Berube made a strong case for the emergence of a unique gay subculture for soldiers during World War II, one that allowed homosexuals to survive repeated attempts to oust and humiliate them, and in some cases to thrive. Participation in World War II quickly became a double-edged sword for many gay soldiers. It provided new and provocative environments in which they expressed their sexuality, or at least came to terms with being gay, yet the war also empowered many confused or prejudiced officials to humiliate homosexual soldiers and make their post-war years difficult. Wartime tolerance gave way to postwar backlash, when the United States' military instituted a policy to "blue," or dishonorably discharge homosexuals. Officers subjected homosexuals to humiliating interrogations, sometimes simply on the word of a single accuser. The military constructed holding areas that in some cases resembled concentration camps in which soldiers waited several months for a trial. Blue discharges haunted homosexuals for years: they lost their veterans benefits, any medals they earned, and found it difficult to get jobs and secure loans at home. Overall, however, Berube indicated that gay men and women emerged from World War II stronger and more determined to fight for their rights as gay citizens.¹⁶

¹⁵ Mark Stein, "Theoretical Politics, Local Communities," 4.

¹⁶ Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1990). Margot Canaday discusses the post-World War II relationships between homosexuals, the military, and the federal government in "Building A Straight State: Sexuality and Social Citizenship under the 1944 G.I. Bill," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 3 (December 2003): 935-957. Canaday argues that when the government made soldiers discharged for being homosexual ineligible for G.I.

Just as Berube took the field by storm with his work, other scholars found that gay subcultures existed in larger urban areas in the United States, some by the turn of the twentieth century, which predated D'Emilio's time frame for such developments. Principal among these was George Chauncey's *Gay New York* which appeared in 1993, the first community study of male homosexuality of any depth.¹⁷ Chauncey found that a visible, coherent, and bawdy gay male subculture developed in parts of New York City by the early 1900s, well before the 1960s when conventional wisdom assumed this to be true. Chauncey noted that gender relationships at this time were decidedly more fluid than previously assumed. In fact, heterosexual working-class men could have ongoing sexual relationships with passive, effeminate "fairies" and not suffer societal ostracism or questions regarding their masculinity. He concluded that these passive inverters exhibited a third sexual orientation, and thus were not seen as socially or morally threatening. While this figure disappeared in the late 1930s, in part due to a conservative backlash against the perceived excesses of the 1920s, the gay male subculture did not disappear. Rather, that subculture relied upon the cultural norms, language, and behavior that had developed for decades to remain "in" society at large yet shielded from the sting of public scorn.

Chauncey's work took the field by storm and opened up a wide range of possibilities for community studies, even regionalization. Scholars produced community

Bill benefits – a process facilitated by the military when gay soldiers were no longer indispensable -- this represented an "explicit" exclusion of queer Americans from the welfare state, an exclusion that only intensified into the 1950s.

¹⁷ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994).

studies of large urban areas in the northeast and far west that showed community building did not follow consistent patterns. In addition, the themes of race, class, urbanization, and politics found their way into the analyses, which only broadened their appeal. Brett Beemyn reconstructed the gay male world in Washington, D.C., and focused primarily on the African-American experience, from 1890 through such seminal events as World War II and the Great Purges of the 1950s. John Loughery produced an eloquent history of the Washington, D.C. white gay male world using the rich diaries of one long-time resident, from World War I until the 1990s.¹⁸ Marc Stein, emphasizing politics in sub cultural growth and development, described Philadelphia between 1945 and 1972 as a cutting-edge city on key 20th-century changes in relations between gay women and men. Challenging the notion that gay men and lesbians were either “entirely distinct” or “completely conjoined,” Stein focused on the fluidity of gender and sexual desire to show that everyday interactions between gays and lesbians were just as political and capable of transforming the political landscape as the Gay Liberation Front or the Homophile Movement. He also suggested that if a LGBT subculture existed in a “forgotten big city” like Philadelphia, then they likely existed in every large city in the United States, regardless of region.¹⁹

¹⁸ Brett Beemyn, “A Queer Capital: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Life in Washington, D.C., 1890-1955” (Ph. D dissertation, University of Iowa, 1997); John Loughery, *The Other Side of Silence: Men’s Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth-Century History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998).

¹⁹ Marc Stein, *The City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), ix, 1-3, 17. The central problem with Stein’s analysis involves his need to see everything in political terms---his definition of politics is terribly broad and his frequent reference to “everyday resistance” is tedious---as is his need to place relationships between gays and lesbians as the central agent for change. He implies that gay men and women essentially revamped societal

Regional work on the Midwest and the South showed that homosexuals carved out livable existences in areas previously thought barren of such subcultures, a fact which seriously questioned whether gay community development and urbanization were interdependent. Sociologist Will Fellows argued that rural gay men encountered rigid gender roles, social isolation, racism, religious conservatism, sexual prudism, and the suspicion of the unfamiliar in the years spent on the farm. Worse yet, no role models existed that might offer any hope as to the possibility of living an alternative lifestyle. However, Fellows illustrated that in this seemingly homophobic environment, queer men carved out livable existences, as non-traditional gender behavior was more likely to be excused as eccentricity by family members. Isolation also gave them time to think about their emerging sexualities and remain free from excessive peer pressure to conform. In the end, Fellows contends, most farm people accept things for what they are, and this was a good thing for rural gay men.²⁰

James Sears and John Howard also contributed to the understanding of regional aspects of sexuality, this time for the South, but each offered strikingly different perspectives. In a multi-volume history of queer Southern life, Sears showed that the Homophile movement provided the infrastructure within southern communities to harness the new, post-Stonewall activism. He chronicled the forgotten efforts of the “rebel,” “rubyfruit,” and “rhinestone” brigades, his terms for Southern gay and lesbian residents based upon their sexuality, to carve out queer space for themselves and

expectations and notions of homosexuality on their own, when I would argue that changes in the level of acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality came from the liberalization of heterosexuals, which gay men and women certainly helped bring about.

²⁰ Will Fellows, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 9-25.

overcome the community pressures and intra-group conflicts that made being “out” before Stonewall almost impossible. Sears looked at a wide geographic range of cities -- from Richmond and Birmingham all the way to Houston -- between the time of the Stonewall rebellion and the March on Washington in 1979. For Sears, the Dade County, Florida referendum, the successful 1978 fight waged by Anita Bryant and other Save Our Children supporters to overturn a local anti-discrimination ordinance, “lit the fuse for mainstream political activism in the South and the country.” It and the subsequent March on Washington capitalized on the efforts of homophile predecessors, providing the networks and activism history necessary to encourage a gay rights movement in the South.²¹

John Howard produced some of the best work on the South, and offered a different perspective on queer culture than Sears. A native of Mississippi who trained under Martin Duberman at Emory University, Howard produced *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South* in 1997, a series of articles on gay and lesbian history in the

²¹ James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997); James T. Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 1-4, 317. Sears works are excellent oral histories of Southern gay activism, but they have shortcomings. His argument that the homophile movement was “largely forgotten” might be true for southern homophiles, but the homophile movement in areas along the West coast and in New York and Chicago was well known. At times, Sears seems to contradict himself---activism was muted at best and the gay/lesbian south was “less a community than a non-public lifestyle” at one point in the narrative. Later, he cites activism from the “Lonely Hunters” era as providing a blueprint for later protest actions, and he notes the relatively consistent presence of interracial gay sex, coded language, bars, softball leagues, drag shows, and networks of friends/parties---all of which are hallmarks of “community.” Pre-1969 communities were different, no doubt, but not nonexistent. Probably the most intriguing argument Sears makes is that “homosexual discretion and heterosexual disregard” allowed communities to exist and develop (even though he denies that REAL communities existed elsewhere in the book).

South, from the antebellum period to publication. Howard called it the “first book of Southern lesbian and gay history,” rightly noting the exclusion of gays and gay history in the South by both well-meaning and malevolent archivists, as well as the bi-coastal bias in gay history---only New York and California had gay histories, and forget about rural folks having their say. Southern homosexuals were not the self-loathing, closeted prisoners that expatriates in California and New York suggested. Howard saw “three R’s” running through the fabric of Southern gay and lesbian history: race, religion, and “rurality.” Protestant evangelicalism “proved vital” in shaping the lives of gays and lesbians in the South, as did the South’s peculiar historical institution – slavery -- and its lingering impact on race relations. Rurality, or more specifically the excessive rurality of the South in general, meant that space and movement must be accounted for in gay and lesbian history. Anybody can have same-sex desire, but acting on it requires people to move in the South – between isolated communities and urban environments, even between states.²²

Howard expanded that argument and took a leaf from Chauncey in *Men Like That*. Howard dissected the Mississippi gay male world, denying that it was a wasteland for the gay and transgendered after World War II. He found that there was much sex between men, usually local – and unlike Chauncey, rural in nature -- until good roads were built in the 1960s. In addition, Howard portrayed the 1950s as key years of personal and sexual freedom in Mississippi, likely the product of post-World War II era liberalism, when gay and bisexual men could look and act “queer” without too much fear of reprisal so long as they played by certain rules. Men wrote about sex and acted upon

²² John Howard, *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 4-5.

their desires, although almost all remained mindful of community standards of decency. Desire, instead of politics and community, served as the organizing category for this study, and alternative lifestyles fell under the large umbrella of what was considered “queer”---everything from eccentricities in dress, speech, hobbies, personal behavior, to sexual practices. This made gay sexuality less threatening, especially when combined with the “deflective pretense of ignorance” so common in rural southern towns. *Men Like That* refuted the notion that rural gay men missed out or needed to move to an urban environment to live fully gay lives. It was a powerful answer to D’Emilio and his emphasis on urbanization and capitalism in that regard.²³

Just as the Northeast was considered an urban Mecca for gay subcultures, historians studied the far West in some detail as well. California occupies a long-standing position as an oasis for gays and lesbians, especially after World War II. Nan Boyd explored the wild days of community development in San Francisco before 1965 in her influential *Wide Open Town*. Boyd showed why San Francisco was “San Francisco” for gay men and lesbians---from its large entertainment districts, the presence of world-renowned gay bars that served as precursors of queer culture formation, and an overall liberalism that made it an attractive place for gays and lesbians to live, especially after the end of Prohibition in 1933. She also focused on why San Francisco was unique in the grand scheme of gay community history---its coastal location, its popularity with tourists and immigrants, and the presence of large numbers of military personnel during and after

²³ John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), x-xii. It should be noted, however, that Howard places special emphasis on Mississippi’s largest city, Jackson, for placing a “spell” on gay and bisexual men who resided in the more rural areas of the state on page 14. This would seem to suggest that urban areas, even in the South, were important for LGBT community formation.

World War II. Boyd illustrated that San Francisco's reputation for queer frivolity and being a "wide open town" was hard-earned, as gay residents fought everything from local crackdowns to the national backlash against gays in the federal government in the 1950s. Gay city residents had already used the legal and political system with aplomb to challenge repression when the Stonewall Rebellion occurred in New York. Boyd, in a most provocative way, indicated that ultimately the gay subculture in the Bay City struggled as much as other urban gay enclaves in the United States to establish itself and prosper.²⁴

Peter Boag shifted the focus further north to Oregon in *Same-Sex Affairs*, a work as soulful as George Chauncey's but more heavily tilted to issues of class, race, and even age. Boag found that two distinct queer subcultures developed in the Pacific Northwest: one, dominated by transient workers, working class youth, and immigrants that eventually encountered an official Progressive-Era crackdown by middle-class authorities; another, a middle-class gay subculture that took advantage of good wages and access to education to forge a more "successful" subculture able to withstand the community's backlash. Unlike Chauncey, who described a sexual world in New York categorized by gender-based behavior, Boag found age and class to be the most predictable determinant of one's role during sex and the community's reaction to that sex. Also for Boag, it was in mid-size Western towns and others of similar size all across the United States that the first, real gay subcultures developed, an argument that redefines

²⁴ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Boyd should be commended for her protracted look at the lesbian perspective in San Francisco.

our understanding of the impact of urbanization and population in relation to community development.²⁵

This brief examination of the historiography of U.S. LGBT sexuality suggests that a wide geographic gap developed in the generation of community studies. Specifically, nothing substantive for states east of California to the Mississippi River exists. An article or two on gay bars in Denver and Boise, Idaho, offered glimpses of gay sexuality in western urban subcultures. Together, however, they hardly constitute a viable data sampling from which to generalize about homosexuality in the western United States. To date, nothing of substance has been completed on homosexual enclaves in cities that seem to call out for investigation, such as Dallas, Kansas City, Houston, Santa Fe, or Oklahoma City for example.

It was for these reasons that a study of the origins, character, and history of Oklahoma City's gay male subculture seemed necessary. Drawing heavily on the work of George Chauncey and Peter Boag, this dissertation will uncover the cultural aspects of Oklahoma City's homosexual community---where gay and bisexual men lived and worked, how their sexuality influenced their public and private lives, where they congregated, and how their family and friends reacted to their sexuality. It will include an analysis of certain elements frequently cited as watershed developments in the growth of a homosexual subculture---hostile medical opinions, the availability of the automobile, World War II, the Cold War, and the Stonewall Rebellion----and how those national events affected the queer male world in Oklahoma City, if at all.

²⁵ Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 3-10.

Oklahoma City represents a perfect case study. Settled late and in a frenetic, boom-town fashion, Oklahoma City had a cosmopolitan population of varying ethnic and social classes that from the beginning worked side by side to build a new kind of city in record time. Oilmen, jazz artists, authors, Native Americans, political opportunists, cowboys, and early-day civil rights activists roamed the streets in Oklahoma City. By World War I, distinct residential and business districts developed, all of which separated residents along socioeconomic and ethnic lines, but Oklahoma City housed one of the roughest vice situations in the western United States. Indeed, “Hell’s Half-Acre,” an area bound by Broadway to Santa Fe Streets and from Grand to California, contained rough women and saloons, few law enforcement officers, and a reputation for murder and mayhem of all sorts. In this environment, isolated from respectable society and yet located so close to it and the downtown centers of commerce, men could successfully express non-normative sexual orientations. As the capital of Oklahoma and geographically centralized within the state, Oklahoma City was much more tolerant than its rural counterparts throughout the state, yet prone to be just as wild and chaotic as any boomtown. Describing how the gay and bisexual subculture survived and evolved in an evangelical, Southern, conservative state, which is how Oklahoma is generally perceived, would also give this study a wider appeal.

From a methodological standpoint, this study owes a great deal to George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*. Chauncey used New York City police records and court documents relating to sodomy trials to map out the physical and psychic dimensions of the gay male community. Case records listed where, when, and why an individual was arrested and how the case evolved in the system, but they proved especially valuable

because they contained telling information as to how heterosexual New Yorkers felt about homosexuals. Personal interviews, private writings and memorabilia, newspapers, and other materials rounded out the work and gave it a participant perspective.

This dissertation also relied on police records, court records, newspaper research, census returns, and interviews with gay and bisexual residents, but the author encountered a number of difficulties while trying to access police records. Despite the Oklahoma City Police Department's open records policy,²⁶ requests for arrest records were lost, returned as incomplete, or the records were characterized as "missing." Clerks insisted that applications include the social security number for men arrested as early as the 1920s, and record requests once returned as missing or unavailable might occasionally be filled if resubmitted later. Once record clerks and supervisors discovered what kind of research the author was performing – investigations of same-sex sexual activity in Oklahoma City – they were unhelpful at best and openly thwarted research efforts at worst.

Other difficulties surfaced – many of the same issues faced by other scholars of LGBT history – relating to this dissertation's use of personal interviews to document the feelings and actions queer Oklahoma City residents. John Howard speaks to the obvious difficulties associated with participant-driven sources: they offer one participant's perspective, or a group of individual perspectives, which may or may not be collaborated by other documentation, and are subject to the whims of romanticized or selective memory. Also, the danger of asking self-identified gay men about their *gay* life history

²⁶ Essentially, if a citizen fills out an application, knows basic information about an event that the Oklahoma City police investigated, and pays the search fee, the records are made available. Records involving minors, rape, or incest are redacted before they are released.

would “isolate sexuality and remove it from everyday life.” The author acknowledges these pitfalls and does not contend that oral history is superior to documents or other historical records, nor that participant perspectives should be privileged when they contradict written source materials. It seems to violate the sanctity of the historical method, however, to ignore gay oral histories, or subject them to an even higher standard of credibility than other interview sources, especially when they are the only materials available for documenting the existence of gay bars in the 1940s, reactions to homophobic officials and closeted members of the gay and bisexual community, and how their sexuality affected their personal and professional lives. The remembrances of gay Americans are no less valuable – or historically relevant and accurate -- than, say, the slave narratives compiled in the 1930s by the Works Progress Administration. As Howard correctly points out, “(t)he age-old squelching of our words and desires can be replicated over time when we adhere to ill-suited and unbending standards of historical methodology.”²⁷

For this study, interview participants were solicited through an advertisement placed in the *Gayly Oklahoman*, Oklahoma’s biweekly statewide LGBT newspaper. In addition, a presentation the author made at a monthly meeting of the Central Oklahoma PrimeTimers – a social and community-based organization open to mature gay and bisexual men – encouraged several members of that group to contact me about interviewing for this project. I interviewed over thirty participants for this study – twenty-four men, six women, and one male-to-female transsexual. The majority of the interviews occurred face-to-face, usually in the participants’ home or other familiar

²⁷ John Howard, *Men Like That*, 5-6.

location, and they were tape-recorded for transcription later. Some respondents who live outside of Oklahoma preferred email or telephone interviews. The age range of participants was wide, between twenty-five and eighty-one at the time of interview, but eleven were over seventy and eighteen were over sixty years old. Only three were under forty years of age, which heavily tilts the interview pool to those born before 1945. The occupations of those interviewed varied, but twenty-six of thirty fell into four broad categories: professional, entertainment/working class, non-entertainment/working class, and medical. And those occupational categories were evenly distributed -- just as many architects, accountants, educators, and attorneys made up the interview pool as did hairdressers, contractors, mechanics, and bartenders. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of interview subjects were Caucasian. With the exception of one Hispanic gentleman, no other non-Caucasian individual responded to interview solicitations, nor did any of those who participated in the interview process refer a single person of color for a possible interview. Some information regarding African-American LGBT Oklahoma City residents is included in this study, but admittedly it is slight.²⁸ While the overall social, educational, and economic characteristics of the interview participants is well-balanced, the same cannot be said of the racial component, and although it could not be remedied, this stands as an unexamined aspect of the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male world.

The interviews were crucial to outlining the parameters of everyday social, political, and sexual elements of the queer community in Oklahoma City. Names, dates, and events recalled by respondents proved quite accurate when compared to court records

²⁸ See Appendix D for participant demographics.

and newspaper articles. Their opinions and personal reflections gave this study an authenticity it would otherwise lack, for court documents, newspapers, and census records cannot communicate the emotional toll that police brutality took on residents, or the flush of excitement felt by closeted men who attended a drag show in the 1940s for the first time for instance.

In a related manner, the development of a community study brings with it concomitant charges of localism, as well as a constant pressure to explain local events as an outgrowth of the national. Marc Stein discusses the pitfalls, which have appeared quite regularly in the community studies genre that has dominated local LGBT history for the last two decades. Authors can become mired in the “microhistorical” aspects of their work, which limits their effectiveness according to some, to say nothing of making their work boring to non-residents. Worse, the pressure to “out queer” other scholars’ community histories – to show that one city’s LGBT community was more outrageous, supportive, browbeaten, resilient, or political -- to say nothing of the history profession’s expectation that local events occurred in response to national events, “have encouraged premature pronouncements about the typical, atypical, or prototypical aspects of local phenomena.”²⁹

Yet another difficulty, faced by any investigator sifting through the historical record for evidence of sexuality, is one of definition. How can the sexuality of men engaging in same-sex relations in the 1900s and 1910s, for instance, be adequately historicized and described. Ultimately, the terms “gay,” “bisexual,” or “straight” are inadequate and inappropriate, as men from that era did not define their sexuality in those

²⁹ Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities,” 4.

terms. As a result, evidence of same-sex activities is difficult to uncover and, occasionally, forever lost in a morass of obscure legal charges. In addition, scholars have illustrated that men of all ages engaged in homosexual acts for a variety of reasons – money, companionship, sexual gratification, professional advancement, protection, or mentoring to name a few.³⁰ To describe same-sex activity as “homosexuality” or its practitioners as “homosexual” or “bisexual” prevents a critical analysis of sexuality in relation to other historical forces, and it does not fully explain why people made the sexual choices they made or how they felt about those choices.³¹

This author believes that some of these challenges simply are germane to the creation of LGBT community studies. Many if not all of the source materials used in such works, whether documents or interviews, will be local in nature and therefore of only peripheral interest to scholars unfamiliar with the state or region. It is also possible that scholars feel some duty to tell that community’s story in greater detail, especially if that community has been particularly exploited in the past, which privileges local events and sources. Grappling with defining and historicizing same-sex sexuality in Oklahoma City turned out to be no less onerous than it was for other scholars in their respective community studies. Ultimately, this author referred to male same-sex activity as “queer” throughout the text in order to distinguish it as non-normative sexuality. However, when interview participants referred to themselves as “gay” or “bisexual,” that characterization also was used in the text. Although perhaps less precise than some might prefer, “queer” is exclusive enough to discuss adequately the same-sex sexual behavior of male

³⁰ Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 15-86; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 47-63, 65-97.

³¹ Peter Boag, email to author, 2/5/2006.

Oklahoma City residents while broad enough to encapsulate the sexual behavior of those whose sexuality – and feelings about the sexuality -- would be impossible to gauge at the best of times.

Despite these challenges, enough records slipped through and interview participants generously relayed enough information to indicate that Oklahoma City was not a wasteland for gay and bisexual men, at any time in the city's turbulent history. From the moment that a federal marshal fired his gun into the air in April 1889, until the 1960s, men roamed the streets of Oklahoma City looking for other men for sex, for companionship, and for love. Although the state responded by charging men, when applicable, with crimes against nature, they did not do so zealously. By World War II, a number of downtown restaurants and bars catered to homosexuals, at least on a part-time basis, and some did so exclusively by the 1950s. The predictable backlash occurred much like it unfolded in other parts of the United States, but it did so later, in the 1960s, and was largely the result of the previous decades' openness. The backlash coincided with the end of prohibition in Oklahoma in 1959, which altered the trajectory and focus of civil authorities in relation to vice control, and the ascendance of politicians and community leaders on a holy crusade to eradicate homosexuality. A striking aspect of this investigation was that although some of the individuals harping about the "sex deviates" used Biblical imagery and religion as a weapon with which to attack queer men, religious authorities in general paid less attention to the matter. Sermons rarely attacked homosexuality, and protests specifically targeting homosexuals were virtually nonexistent. This might indicate that evangelical religious fervor was less salient in

policing the gay male world or shaping its destiny than was politics in Oklahoma City, and possibly in the West, generally.

Finally, it should be noted that the history of Oklahoma City's male same-sex landscape did not mirror those found in other cities on the east and west coasts, and that should not be surprising given the peculiarities of Oklahoma City's founding. That the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male subculture did not have pansy balls in the 1920s does not mean that it was any less open or queer than New York City's Greenwich Village, from the members' perspective. The historical record is replete with examples of same-sex desire, queer restaurants, private parties, drag shows, gay bars, and gay sexuality expressed publicly, so that it is impossible to deny the presence of queer men from the turn-of-the-century. Queer Oklahoma City residents did not react to the Stonewall Rebellion by galvanizing the community to greater and more daring acts of defiance. It took another decade for the political awakening to occur in Oklahoma City, when gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents responded to political attacks and police repression in an unprecedented way. Although this awakening occurred well after the infamous events in Greenwich Village, and in a more sedate way -- using the legal system for redress -- it was just as empowering and inspirational. Some might argue it was more effective in the long run as well. The Oklahoma City gay male world was remarkably like gay subcultures in other cities, not only by 2000 but even in the 1940s and 1950s. That this can be said of Oklahoma City, capital of one of the most conservative states in the Union, strongly questions the conventional wisdom that describes the geographic expanse between New York and San Francisco as a queer wasteland, devoid of the cultural and political legacies necessary to sustain gay life. To

think anything less denies queer residents in Oklahoma City the authenticity of lives lived, lovers loved, and the stories they shared.

Chapter II
Sodomy in the City:
Queer Love in Oklahoma City, 1889-1940

A queer world existed in Oklahoma City, from at least the turn of the twentieth century, one that took advantage of the peculiarities of Oklahoma City's founding to allow members to find one another, have sex with one another, and establish networks that continually allowed other men to join the fold. Vice and lawlessness dominated the Oklahoma City social landscape before statehood and left an indelible mark on the city's early development. With prostitutes roaming the streets or setting up shop in any number of establishments, and queer men renting rooms for sex in Hell's Half-Acre, it indicates that city residents tolerated alternative displays of sexuality. An undermanned and corrupt police force was powerless to stop social vice anyway, and they usually focused on the more common and easily identifiable crimes like prohibited liquor or gambling. The various construction booms that took place in Oklahoma City between 1889 and World War II meant plentiful jobs existed for men, both married and single. Downtown rooming houses were full of men, and they took full advantage of all that the Oklahoma City social and sexual worlds offered. Court records indicate that men risked a great deal by engaging in sex with other men, as the punishments were severe and certain. This did not deter queer men, however, as they ventured forth in search of others who shared their sexuality. They navigated the rocky terrain in Oklahoma City,

and carved out a viable existence that set the stage for the post-World War II gay coming out party.

The land that eventually became known as Oklahoma City was situated within the heart of the Indian territories. During the 1820s and 1830s, the federal government ceded huge tracts of land to the Five Tribes, removing them in order to facilitate white settlement in the southeastern United States. At that juncture, the Cherokee, the Choctaw, and the Creek were the only tribes of any significant size in the territory, and they owned virtually the entire region. In 1833 some of the Seminole retired and moved to Indian Territory to live with the Creek, and in 1837, the Chickasaw removed to the Choctaw Nation in the southeast corner of the territory. Over the years, the Chickasaw split from the Choctaw Nation and were given their own domain, and new tribes were removed to Indian Territory until the late 1870s. In 1881, when the federal government allocated reservations to Oklahoma tribes for the last time, a problem developed, one with long-range implications. In the center of the territory, surrounded by reservations, sat over 1.8 million acres of unallocated land, the famous Unassigned Lands. Originally, the Seminoles and Creeks controlled the lands, but they ceded them back to the federal government following the Civil War. It was to be given to other tribes to encourage their removal to the territory, but the nearly two million acres were never reallocated. Over the years word spread that these “uninhabited” lands were prime agricultural tracts and would make excellent farms, and many whites came to Indian Territory to investigate these claims. Railroad companies, banking interests from Kansas and Missouri, and wholesalers and merchants all hoped to cash in on a population explosion in the Territory, so they pushed for the federal government to open tracts for settlement.

Rough, ambitious men like David Payne and William Couch led the “Boomer” brigades, hired by moneyed interests, to promote settlements and pressure Congress for access to the lands. In the face of this constant pressure, the federal government cleared the titles to the land by paying the Creek and Seminoles over \$4 million in January 1889. President Benjamin Harrison then signed an order throwing the Unassigned Lands open for settlement.¹

On April 22, 1889, the legendary Oklahoma Land Run took place. In the days leading up to the Run, people flooded into the territory hoping to get land. Estimates varied, but most put the number of inhabitants at between twelve- and twenty-thousand people. Since no cities existed, people congregated around the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe depots, as these outposts offered the only goods or services available. Of the Guthrie, Kingfisher, Norman, and Oklahoma Stations, Oklahoma Station was the largest depot and centrally located in the Unassigned Lands. After the run, some 10,000 people set up a tent city there. Oklahoma City literally was born grown.²

Although the federal government worked very quickly to release the Unassigned Lands, it made no provision for how the new territory would be governed, and Oklahoma Station and its history would forever bear the mark of that oversight. Until Congress passed the Organic Act in May 1890 creating Oklahoma Territory and providing a uniform system of government, Oklahoma City was essentially left to its own devices for

¹ Arrell Morgan Gibson, *Oklahoma: A History of Five Centuries* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), see chapters 6 and 14; Howard Wayne Morgan and Anne Hodges Morgan, *Oklahoma: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977), 47-50; Roy P. Stewart, *Born Grown: An Oklahoma City History* (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank, 1974), xiv-7.

² Stewart, *Born Grown*, xiv-7.

at least a year. The Oklahoma City Council drafted ordinances covering everything from land statutes and claim laws to livestock rules, but they left the finer points of law to the imagination. To be sure, serious disputes arose, usually involving property conflicts, survey errors, and claim jumping, but the most serious problems dealt with the lack of legitimacy that residents accorded the provisional leaders. By the end of 1889, the provisional city government was a shambles, so much so that the U.S. Attorney General ordered it dissolved and all Oklahoma City ordinances revoked. Federal marshals kept the peace as best as they could, but this period of absolute lawlessness spawned a subculture of vice and violence that Oklahoma City never completely overcame.³

Also playing roles in the early solidification of vice in Oklahoma City were the construction booms of 1898 and 1903, fueled by railroad expansion, which saw the population increase from 4,000 to 14,000.⁴ These booms started and continued until World War I. Like most frontier areas, men outnumbered women in Oklahoma City from the beginning. In June 1889, two months after the Run, there were still over 2000 men and only 721 women in the Oklahoma City area. The construction work brought many young, unattached workers to Oklahoma City, causing the number of amusements that catered to men generally and single men specifically to explode. The saloons,

³ Stewart, *Born Grown*, 18-21; Albert McRill, *And Satan Came Also: An Inside Story of a City's Social and Political History* (Oklahoma City: Britton Publishing Company, 1955), 19.

⁴ Bob L. Blackburn, *Heart of the Promised Land: Oklahoma County, An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications, 1982), 85; For the economic and social impact of the completion of the St. Louis and Oklahoma City Railroad, see Aaron Bachhofer II, "Forgotten Founder: Charles G. 'Gristmill' Jones and the Growth of Oklahoma City, 1889-1911." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 80 (Spring 2002): 44-61.

brothels, gambling dens, and private clubs soon became prosperous businesses in the new city. In fact, license fees and fines imposed on patrons by city authorities provided the fledgling city with its first dependable source of income.⁵

Given that Oklahoma City needed revenue, that men outnumbered women almost four to one, and that the respect for law and order was lacking, the vice problem grew unabated. The one-square block bound by Front Street and Broadway, and Grand Avenue and California became known as “Hell’s Half-Acre.”⁶ Here, one found most of the entertainments and businesses that a young, single man might ever need, all within walking distance. There were the Red Onion, Rattlesnake Jake’s, and John Burgess’s first club, all of which sold liquor twenty-four-hours a day. The most notorious madam ever to work in Oklahoma City – and one of the most notorious in the West – also moved to the Half-Acre. “Big Anne” Wynn set up a tent on Front Street right after the Run. A native of Colorado, Wynn was young, blonde, and weighed over two-hundred pounds. Her tent, and the larger house she built on Second Street and Walker when the prostitution cartel moved north later, were “notorious dens of vice, where robbery, rape, and murder and every other crime in the category, would be committed, and she would never be convicted of anything.” Anne parlayed her knowledge of sensitive information on city officials and the value of her services in general into a position of prominence for

⁵ McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 21. Opening a saloon in Oklahoma City was relatively easy. All one needed was a building, a clientele, and a \$250 annual license fee. Despite that exorbitant fee (by 1900 standards), Oklahoma City was never at a loss for drinking establishments.

⁶ Front Street is now known as Santa Fe, and Grand Avenue was renamed Sheridan Avenue in the early 1960s.

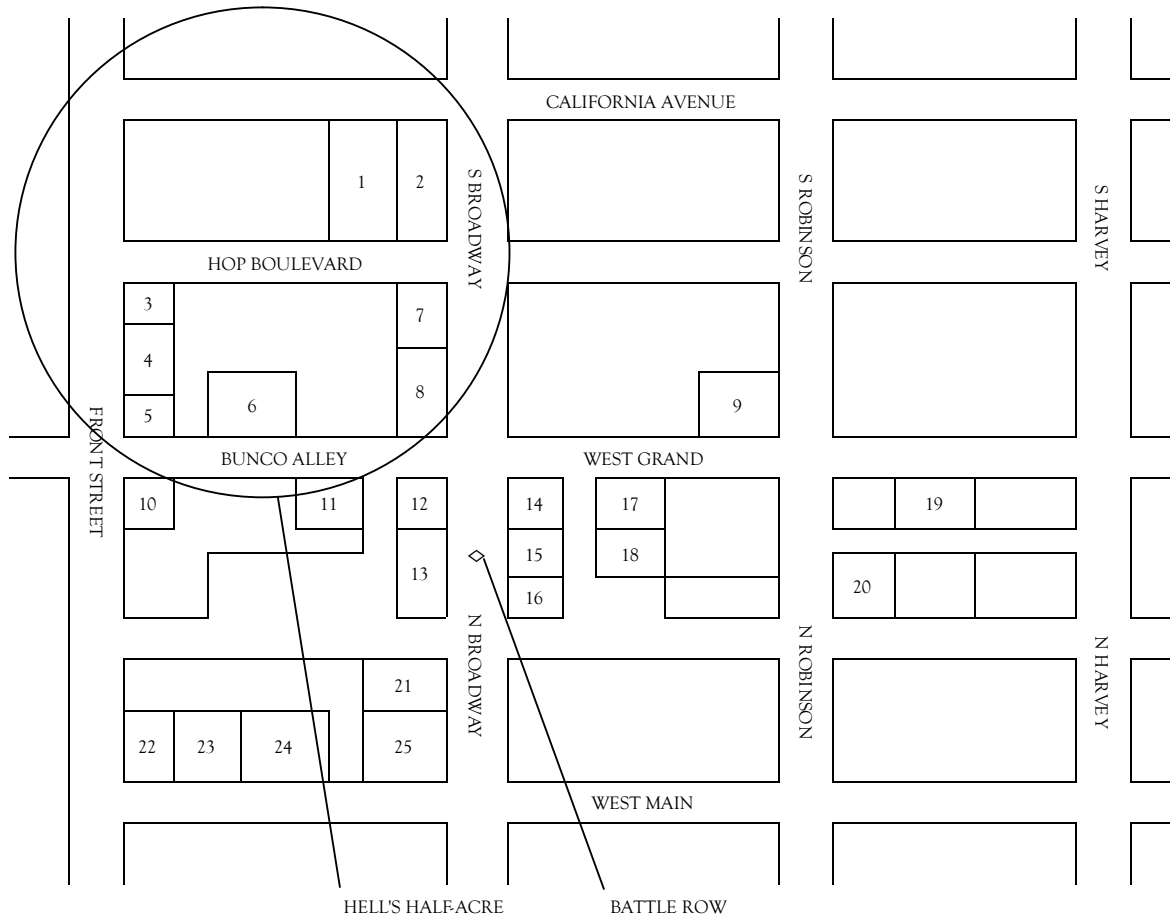
twenty years.⁷ A block north of the Half-Acre, things did not improve much. On north Broadway, or “Battle Row” as residents named it for the number of fights it handled daily, was the Vendome, Oklahoma City’s most luxurious brothel. Owned by Ethel Clopton, the Vendome boasted beautiful girls, Belgian rugs, and the highest prices in town. Next door was the Commercial Saloon, and across the street were the Black and Rogers Saloon and the Two Johns Saloon, John Burgess’s second club, the roughest and most notorious watering holes in Oklahoma City’s history. The Two Johns’ saw more illegal action, political wrangling, and underworld deals than any other Oklahoma City drinking establishment. Ironically, the Two Johns was located right next to City Hall, a fact that never seemed to cause the saloon any grief until mandatory prohibition started in 1907.⁸

⁷ Information and quote on Wynn from McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 6; Some argue that prostitutes were powerless, by definition, and thus question Wynn’s historical importance. Apparently, Wynn collected sensitive information about prominent Oklahoma City political leaders that she used essentially to blackmail her way out of raids and arrests. In addition, we must remember that Anne Wynn was not a prostitute, she was a madam, and more importantly Oklahoma City was not a frontier town by 1900 but a modest-sized metropolis with a relatively modern infrastructure. The prostitutes Anne Butler described in her book – the broken women, with no other options but prostitution, who usually suffered life-long physical and emotional scars as a result of the flesh trade -- were likely not found in Oklahoma City. This was certainly true of Wynn’s second brothel, a plush home on Northwest Second Street. See Butler’s book, *Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Mercy: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865-1890*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985.

⁸ Ronald J. Owens, *Oklahoma Justice: The Oklahoma City Police, A Century of Gunfighters, Gangsters, and Terrorists* (Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing Company, 1995), 7-15, 49. Owens was a long-time member of the Oklahoma City police force and had access to records, reminisces, and photographs that would never be available to the general public. This work, although somewhat anecdotal, provides a crucial description of crime and punishment in Oklahoma City; McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 6, 29.

Figure One

Downtown Oklahoma City, 1889-1907



- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 – Red Onion Saloon | 15 – Two John’s Saloon |
| 2 – Rattlesnake Jake’s Saloon | 16 – Black and Rogers Saloon |
| 3 – Kid Bannister’s Bank | 17 – Orient Saloon |
| 4 – Big Anne Wynn’s Tent | 18 – Police Station and County Jail (1st) |
| 5 – John Burgess’s Club | 19 – Overholser Theater |
| 6 – Southern Club | 20 – OKC Athletic Club |
| 7 – Cottonwood de Bastille | 21 – Lee Hotel |
| 8 – First Courthouse Shack | 22 – Post Office (1st) |
| 9 – Overholser Opera House (1st) | 23 – City Council Headquarters (1st) |
| 10 – Blue Front Saloon | 24 – Arlington Club |
| 11 – Billingsley’s Place | 25 – First Bank |
| 12 – The Vendome | |
| 13 – Commercial Saloon | |
| 14 – City Hall North | |

Thus it can be said that Oklahoma City, from the beginning, exhibited what might be called a high degree of lawlessness and an institutionalized subculture of vice, one that operated freely, waxed and waned, but never completely disappeared. Even when Grand Avenue became a central thoroughfare in a bustling downtown Oklahoma City after World War II, it was still home to some of the most notorious nightspots in the city, gay and straight. This was an environment where residents expressed non-normative behavior more openly, if only slightly so; a place where alternative sexualities might be exhibited with little notice. In addition, the sheer number of saloons and bawdy houses in the district made the control of liquor and prostitution a primary focus for law enforcement officials and morals crusaders until the late 1950s. This allowed queer men even more freedom in an area already devoid of social restraint.

On the surface, gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City before World War II would seem to be non-existent, and for good reason. There were no ostensibly gay bars that served as meeting places and cultural hubs around which queer men would congregate, nor were there any obviously gay men whom others could emulate or use to counter their feelings of isolation. The city's largest newspaper, the *Daily Oklahoman*, contains almost no overt references to same-sex love. However, the historical record contains evidence that queer men lived in Oklahoma City, and that they found willing sexual partners. A critical examination of court records, newspapers, and census returns indicates this. In addition, the very concept of homosexuality, as contemporary residents understand it, was neither familiar to early twentieth-century Oklahoma City residents

nor indicative of how they policed same-sex sexuality in general.⁹ Men accused of sodomy, or ‘crimes against nature,’ with other consenting adult men were tried and punished by Oklahoma County authorities just as swiftly and harshly as those accused of such crimes with women, or even children. This indicates that authorities punished sodomy, not homosexuality, a fact that places Oklahoma City outside of the norm with regard to post-Progressive Era criminalization of same-sex behavior. In Portland, Progressive-era crackdowns of heterosexual sex set the stage for later, post-1920 increases in attacks on gay and bisexual men. There, attempts to reestablish the potency of anti-sodomy laws and control homosexuals in public flowed from Oregonians’ attempts to regulate prostitution, venereal disease, and middle-class adultery during the previous decade. In New York City, George Chauncey notes that the social purity societies who worked tirelessly to rid the city of prostitutes and police corruption in the years before World War I gained valuable expertise and motivation to attack the gay and bisexual subculture in the 1920s and 1930s. Until that time, the “City of Bachelors” had operated rather brazenly; afterward, city officials and community groups effectively closeted the New York City gay male world leading to a thorough “exclusion of homosexuality from the public sphere” during the Depression. Oklahoma City seemed to have more in common with San Francisco, which actually emerged from the social

⁹ Although the criminalization of same-sex sexual acts had been underway in some states since before the American Revolution, the binary classification of sexuality along the hetero-homo axis did not exist in the United States until the 1890s. John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 120-130. The best theoretical explanation of the rise of sexual categories in the United States is offered by Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Penguin Books, 1995) and *Love Stories: Sex Between Men Before Homosexuality* (Chicago: University Press, 2001).

purity crusades of the early twentieth century with what Boyd called “publicly visible queer cultures and communities.” There, visibly queer bars and nightclubs flourished post-Prohibition, which seemed to diffuse much of the Progressive reformers’ vigor.¹⁰

By the early 1900s, Oklahoma City was roughly a decade old, filled with a number of new industrial companies, a modest downtown area, and a sense of optimism regarding its continued economic expansion. The city was also home to brothels, drug users, prostitutes, and any number of criminals and hooligans. Since Oklahoma City was not a large city, the names of those arrested for various offenses often found their way into the *Daily Oklahoman* under the long-running column, “Pavement Pickups.” An examination of arrests listed throughout the territorial period shows that Oklahoma City police officers arrested residents for everything from larceny to bigamy. They also arrested men for any number of imprecise offenses, those that did not fit into the conventional penal vocabulary, encounters that could very easily have involved same-sex sexual activity.

In May of 1902, L. Williamson, a truck driver, broke into the home of one J.R. Graves. According to police information used by the *Daily Oklahoman*, Williamson made “indecent proposals” to Graves, and authorities held him over for trial that very day in the court of Judge Miller.¹¹ In December of that year, the police arrested Mike Casey for lewd conduct, and the following July of 1903, they cited John Grant for indecent

¹⁰ Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 186-206; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 136-149, 331-354; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 2-6.

¹¹ *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/20/1902.

exposure at the Planter Hotel located at Reno Avenue.¹² Other arrests for indecent exposure included J.W. Matthews, a visitor from Guthrie, Sam Sarzlara, B. Harrison, J.H. Humphrey, and Dan Garret, all between 1904 and 1905. The police arrested Garrett so many times on indecent exposure complaints that city prosecutors turned his case over to Oklahoma County authorities, who charged him with a felony. Other charges were less specific but seemed to glow with a sense of indecency. In 1910, city resident Ed May pled guilty in police court to “an immoral charge.” No other information about his case exists, but it is interesting that it was a generic “immoral charge” that May faced instead of a more specific one such as vagrancy by prostitution or public exposure.¹³

Realistically, men arrested for exposing themselves engaged in one of three types of behavior. First, they were caught in a sexual act, of some kind, with a female prostitute. Second, they were publicly exposing themselves, either intentionally or unintentionally, and residents reported this to the police who arrested them. Third, they were engaged in a sexual act, of some kind, with another man. The first possibility is easily dismissed, as when arrests for prostitution made their way to “Pavement Pickups,” both the prostitutes and the men arrested would be listed together. The charge for prostitution was also listed as “immoral acts” or “lewd behavior” instead of the more specific charge of indecent exposure. The second possibility -- that they acted in a solitary fashion, intentionally or unintentionally -- is more plausible than the first possibility, but not completely realistic. The rash of charges – seven different offenders

¹² *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/1902, and 7/12/1903.

¹³ *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/26/1904, 1/24/1904, 4/16/1905, 8/4/1905, and 9/28/1910.

within eleven months, all arrested at downtown rooming houses or hotels, and all for exposing themselves to the public -- seems unusual at the least.

It is possible that the men arrested for these and other non-specific crimes were engaging in some kind of same-sex sexual activity. This seems likely if one considers that Oklahoma City's indecent exposure law covered a wide range of offenses.

According to the statute, people guilty of indecent exposure included:

Any person who shall conduct himself in a riotous or disorderly manner, or who shall openly use profane or indecent language, or who shall indecently expose his or her person, or who shall be guilty of any lewd or lascivious conduct in public, or who shall commit any nuisance upon any street, alley, or sidewalk, or other public place in the City shall be deemed guilty of an offense."¹⁴

In short, virtually any behavior could be construed as indecent, if the arresting officer decided it was so. Perhaps this became a convenient, generic charge that queer men might be subjected to, one that was easier to plead guilty to and pay a fine than fight.¹⁵

This was a common practice in larger cities throughout the United States, a product of late nineteenth-century reforms by anti-vice societies. Authorities classified disorderly conduct, vagrancy, lewdness, indecency, or loitering as misdemeanor charges, charges that became double-edged swords for queer men. On one hand, the ease with which the charges could be disposed of -- by paying a fine or using a false name -- probably made queer men more comfortable to pursue sexual relationships and be visible in the

¹⁴ *Oklahoma City Revised Ordinances, 1948* (Oklahoma City: Harlow Publishing 1948): Chapter 4, sec. 7-51. This statute, apparently, remained unchanged from when first passed by the Oklahoma City Council.

¹⁵ For the role that generic charges played in policing the gay community in New York and elsewhere, see George Chauncey, "'What Gay Studies Taught the Court:' The Historians' Amicus Brief in *Lawrence v. Texas*." *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* v. 10, n.3 (2004): 13-14.

community. On the other hand, the ease with which authorities could harass them with a plethora of annoying charges initiated a systemic approach to policing the gay community, one that escalated easily.¹⁶

While there was probably some male same-sex activity in Oklahoma City obscured by the generic charges of disorderly conduct or indecent exposure, other, more concrete examples of same-sex love exist in the historical record. Some of the most notorious involved a young neer-do-well named James Blaine Hathaway. Hathaway was born in Missouri in 1885 and moved to Oklahoma City sometime around 1900. He quickly grew into a young adult who had problems with authority, which led to a number of run-ins with Oklahoma City police and Oklahoma County authorities for everything from burglary to jail escape. He was a laborer according to census returns, but also delivered whisky for prominent local bootlegger F.D. “Dick” Taggart. Apparently Blaine was quick to anger as he once threatened his brother Otto’s life with a shotgun, shortly after being released from the city jail for carrying a pair of concealed revolvers.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid.; The best discussion of reform societies, their role in anti-vice crusades, and class-based nativism is Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 123-131; Anti-prostitution campaigns are detailed more fully in Allan Brandt, *No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States Since 1880* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), and Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

¹⁷ *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/5/1911, 14; “West Grand Terrorized By Boy With Shotgun”; *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/31/1910; *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/10/1908; See 1910 Oklahoma Census (Oklahoma County, Oklahoma City, Ward 8, Enumeration District 188, sheet 4a), and Fourteenth Census of the United States. State of Oklahoma, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma City, 1920 (Ward 4, ED 161, sheet 20a). Hathaway’s legal problems were somewhat legendary before World War I. He and Lige Gabel were given 10-year terms in the state penitentiary for armed robbery in 1913, and Hathaway was convicted of assault with a dangerous weapon, liquor transportation, and other violent crimes too many times to mention. See cases #3020, #3479, and #4787, *State v. Blaine Hathaway*,

In the summer of 1905, the Oklahoma County sheriff held Hathaway for what authorities labeled a “serious charge.” It seems Blaine met G.C. Walker, an “unsophisticated” young man from Stonewall, Oklahoma, and Hathaway quickly gained the boy’s trust. Hathaway procured a room for Walker at a downtown boarding house, according to a newspaper account, a room that the two men apparently shared. Walker charged that “after he had undressed, Hathaway secured his trousers for a time and when they were returned to him he was minus \$4.50.”¹⁸

Several obvious questions arise from this incident, such as why was Hathaway procuring a room for another man, who was presumably of age to do so on his own, and why was this man undressing in the same room with Hathaway, a perfect stranger? Given the availability of cheap rooms in Oklahoma City, Walker certainly did not need Hathaway to procure one, especially if he had \$4.50 in his pocket, and it is doubtful that he needed Hathaway to fold his clothing for him. Hathaway lived with his parents at 114 East California, which was only a block or two from the downtown area, so he certainly did not need to rent a room for habitation.¹⁹ The likely answer is that Hathaway and Walker engaged in some kind of sexual activity, and Walker became upset with Hathaway over the missing money and filed a police report. It is worth noting that authorities only filed charges of petty larceny against Hathaway and not the more serious charge of sodomy in state court, which suggests that authorities used wide latitude when

Oklahoma County Court House, Oklahoma City Oklahoma, for the felony charges he faced before 1920 alone.

¹⁸ “Blaine Hathaway Again.” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/8/1905, 5.

¹⁹ Twelfth Census of the United States. Territory of Oklahoma. Oklahoma County Ward 5, ED 171, sheet 1B, 1900.

charging men with crimes. Lesser charges, such as disorderly conduct or in Hathaway's case petty larceny, would be much easier to prove in court – if the case even made it that far. Defendants might be inclined to simply plead guilty, pay the fine, and have the matter resolved quickly.

If Hathaway and Walker indeed had just met, perhaps Hathaway was hustling on the bustling streets of Oklahoma City, supplementing his meager income with funds from the sex trade. If true, he was not alone in that trade, for prostitution had been a source of embarrassment for city leaders and a target of numerous vice crackdowns since the first days of Oklahoma City's existence.²⁰ It is certainly possible that male prostitutes worked downtown in Oklahoma City, as the incident between Hathaway and Walker suggests. Perhaps Hathaway needed money, as he seemed to gravitate toward illegal activities such as gambling and bootlegging to make ends meet. Male prostitution could be an economic strategy for survival, just as it was for women, especially in Oklahoma City when times were tough and employment difficult to come by. The ease with which Hathaway and Walker found one another suggests that young queer men were visible elements in the Oklahoma City landscape, even if only to other young queer men.

In fact, one of the hallmarks of American social history after World War I was the increased importance of peer cultures. As historian Paula Fass illustrates, post-1918 American youth invented and reveled in a culture that was more independent of the home and family than ever before. Greater numbers of young, middle-class Americans started

²⁰ Prostitution in Oklahoma City was a continuing source of embarrassment and concern for city leaders since 1890. See McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 25-32, and throughout the entire book for references. References to prostitution arrests abound in the *Daily Oklahoman*, and Ron Owens documents the politics of vice in the Oklahoma City police department. Police chiefs might be dismissed as quickly for being too successful at fighting vice than for not doing enough. Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 60-64, 161-165.

going to college, driving automobiles, and expanding their attitudes regarding acceptable standards of sexuality. Central to this peer culture was the freedom from home life and parental supervision. This freedom allowed the youth peer culture to experience new things and make new friends at the same time it prepared its members to assume the adult roles and responsibilities shared by their parents. “In a culture slowly moving toward the future, they were caught between those encroaching Main Street roles that they would soon assume and those innovations that had twisted their lives in new directions. So they were optimistic about business and naughty about sex. They could tolerate latitude in the behavior of others but must prudently guard against suspicion in their own,” according to Fass. “There was no hostility toward the world of their elders, only a sense of difference.” Thus attitudes changed more than behavior, but it was that change in attitudes that created a generation that was more tolerant.²¹

This phenomenon was not limited to heterosexual American youth, either. John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman show that this development extended to queer American youth as well. They took advantage of automobiles, college life, and fraternal organizations to explore their own social and sexual boundaries. Possibly, the development and worship of youth culture was more salient to homosexual Americans in that they had even fewer public options for such things at home than their heterosexual

²¹ Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920’s* (New York: Oxford Press, 1977), quotes taken from 368 and 376. Chapter two details changes in the nuclear family brought on by the rise of such things as the automobile and peer culture, and chapters three and four detail all aspects of the new peer culture and how it came to dominate the lives of post-World War I adolescent in the United States

counterparts, and it allowed them to explore their sexuality as well.²² In Oklahoma City, that youth culture was decidedly working-class. Of the fourteen cases of adult-to-adult sodomy prosecuted in Oklahoma County before 1940, at least half involved one party under the age of twenty-five, and all were laborers---brick masons, factory workers, street maintenance workers, and general laborers. A few were lower middle-class – salesmen and clerks – but construction workers and general laborers were those arrested for sodomy most often.²³

Peer cultures, gay or straight, found plenty of opportunities to be sexually active at a plethora of downtown rooming houses and hotels located along Grand Avenue and Broadway. The size of hotels and rooming houses in downtown Oklahoma City varied, but most were located in the 3rd Ward. Many were small, with reasonable rates, and their location near the downtown shops and transportation hubs made them very attractive for guests. Others were quite large and catered to long-term tenants, most of whom were single men. By 1920, these establishments operated at almost 100% occupancy, and the overwhelming majority of tenants were young, single men under forty. In fact, the 1920 census indicates that almost eight out of ten residents in the 15th and 16th precincts, which

²² John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, chapter 11, “Beyond Reproduction.”

²³ David Johnson, “The Kids of Fairytown,” in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), 99. Employment data came from information cited in case files or in Oklahoma County census records, previously cited. For a closer representation of the employment demographics for gay men in Oklahoma City, only those cases where a man was charged with sodomy committed on or with another adult male are included in this statistic. Crimes committed against children are, by definition, pedophilia and not indicative of a person’s sexual preference, so they were omitted. Interestingly enough, even in those cases involving minors, the primary occupations of the offenders were working-class in nature.

encompassed most of the downtown area, were men.²⁴ One of the most popular institutions in downtown Oklahoma City was the Grand Hotel, located at 113 West Grand, and managed by a Greek immigrant named George Tramejon. The Grand in particular had a very high concentration of men using its facilities, many of whom enjoyed the in-house café. The Grand was owned by local entrepreneur and civic leader Edward Overholser, and he designed his two-story, eighty-room hotel with single men in mind.²⁵ There were other rooming houses and cheap hotels as well. The Victoria Hotel sat at 205 South Broadway, and further up on the opposite side of the street was the New Empire Rooms, located at 226 South Broadway. The Denver Hotel was a block west of Broadway at 206 South Robinson, and the Southern Rooms were next door. Only a block east from the New Empire Rooms were the Century Rooms, located near the Santa Fe tracks on Reno. In addition to these and other smaller rooming houses, there were always rooms for rent in nearby residential neighborhoods. In all of these places, single men could find affordable, temporary housing and the companionship of a prostitute, or another man, was close at hand.²⁶

Historians have illustrated that the so-called rooming house culture was decidedly more fluid -- and forgiving -- than traditional cultures found in the family home for many young men. The rooms in downtown Oklahoma City were plentiful, furnished, and

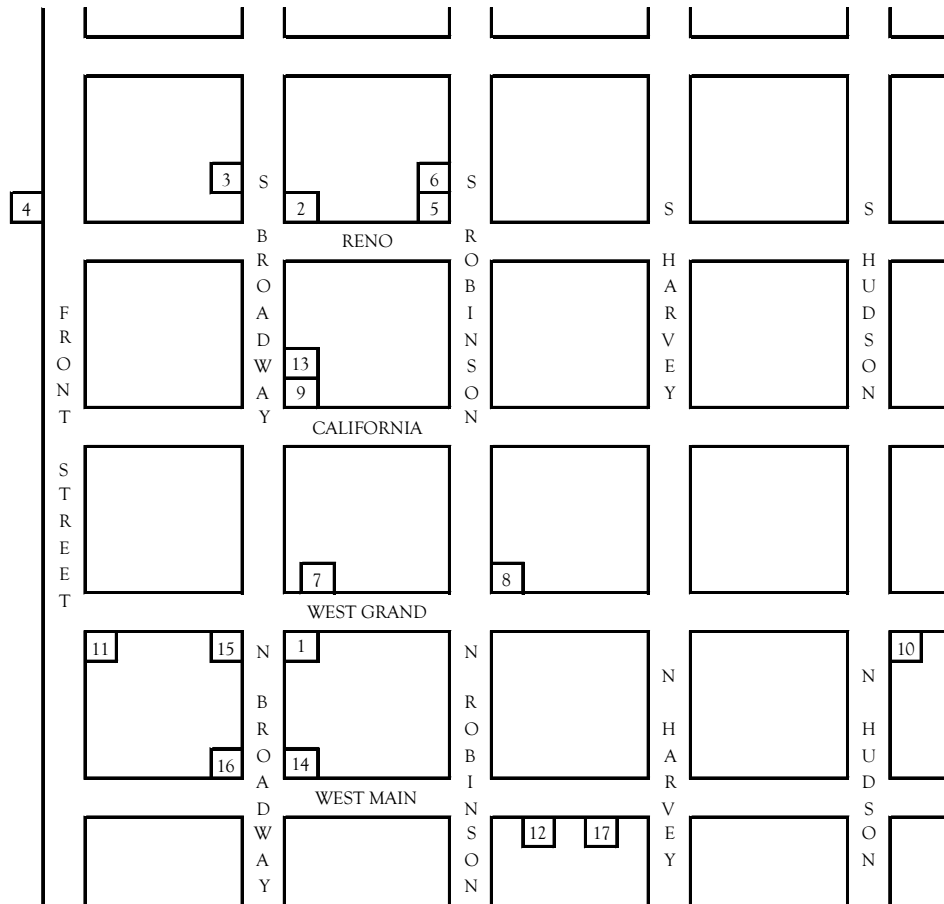
²⁴ Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920 State of Oklahoma, Oklahoma County, Enumeration District 155, 16th voting precinct. Of the 1713 residents enumerated, 1342 were men, which translates into a male population of 78.34%.

²⁵ "Hotels, Cafes, and Refreshment Places," *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/10/1907, 3.

²⁶ Of the sodomy trials in Oklahoma County, nine of those charged or listed as a secondary party lived in the downtown rooming house and hotel district. The list included Archie Wilson, Blaine Hathaway, Frank Johnson, Henry Dismuke, D. Johnson, Raymond Guy, Anderson King, Jack Cloud, and Delbert Smith.

Figure Two

Downtown Hotels and Rooming Houses, 1889-1930



- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1 – Grand Hotel | 13 – Majestic European Hotel |
| 2 – Victoria Hotel | 14 – Stewart Hotel |
| 3 – New Empire Rooms | 15 – Garrison Hotel (Renamed Grace Hotel 1905) |
| 4 – New Century Rooms | 16 – Lee Hotel |
| 5 – Denver Hotel | 17 – Illinois Hotel |
| 6 – Southern Rooms | |
| 7 – Thornton Hotel | |
| 8 – Oxford Rooms/Hotel | |
| 9 – Hotel Jordan | |
| 11 – Hotel Kingkade | |
| 12 – Kross Hotel | |

inexpensive. Long-term leases were unheard of, as most rented by the week, which made them ideal for men with seasonal or construction employment. This was a culture of privacy. For some men, these might be the first residences they inhabited away from the family home or farm, something that likely made them popular with queer men.²⁷

By the 1920s, Oklahoma City cannot be said to have had a homosexual subculture comparable to New York City's. Then again, Oklahoma City was much smaller in terms of overall population than most boroughs in New York. We know, however, that same-sex activities occurred, or were at least hinted at, from a variety of sources. Men looking for other men found them at some point. This indicates that enough points of common socialization existed that queer men could meet, knew where to meet, and communicated that fact among their peer group. It was a community, albeit on a smaller and less formal scale than what might be found in other metropolitan areas in the 1920s.

Another factor that obscures the presence of queer men was an absence of gay bars. One of the hallmarks of any gay subculture in the United States was socialization centers, places where gay and lesbian Americans went to be with others who shared their sexual and emotional desires. Gay bars were some of the most common socialization centers, but they were virtually non-existent in Oklahoma City before World War II.

The reason was simple -- prohibition. Oklahoma entered the union in 1907 as a dry

²⁷ For rooming-house environments, see Mark Peel, "In the Margins: Lodgers and Boarders in Boston, 1860-1900." *Journal of American History* 72 (1986): 813-834; Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 152-154. Although he equates the rise of gay communities all across the country almost exclusively with the spread of twentieth-century capitalism, John D'Emilio makes some pertinent points regarding the new spaces for sexuality that hotels and rental spaces offered in "Capitalism and Gay Identity." *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 65.

state, so well before national prohibition began in 1919 the legitimate bar business in Oklahoma City collapsed. Even when the 21st Amendment passed in 1933, Oklahoma remained dry until a state-wide referendum allowed 3.2 beer to be sold -- proponents argued that 3.2 beer was “non-intoxicating” anyway. Liquor was not available legally until 1959, when a statewide referendum amended the Oklahoma constitution. Of course to argue that Oklahoma was “dry” at any point during its fifty-two years of prohibition is ludicrous, as evidence of the thriving bootleg trade attests.²⁸ Yet, the lack of opportunity for gay and bisexual men to start a bar, or for groups of homosexuals to make an existing establishment a popular hangout, prevented a more public gay presence from developing in Oklahoma City. It also forced queer men to be more creative, using parks and other public facilities to meet other men and have sex.

A more concrete source from which to draw conclusions about gay sexuality in Oklahoma City can be found in criminal prosecution records for sodomy, or “crime against nature.” Oklahoma’s law prohibiting the crime against nature dated from 1890 when the first territorial legislature adopted it along with much of the new territory’s penal code. Again, the quirks of Oklahoma history played a role in how the so-called sodomy statute came to pass. By 1900 most of the state legislatures in east and west coast states refined their existing sodomy statutes in response to the discovery of a “homosexual ring” or an obvious public presence of queer men. Many of the laws had

²⁸ Aside from the almost daily references to illegal liquor raids and seizures in Oklahoma County found in the *Daily Oklahoman* between 1907 and 1959, see James Edward Klein, “A Social History of Prohibition in Oklahoma, 1900-1920.” (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 2003); Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Born Sober: Prohibition in Oklahoma, 1907-1959* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

been in place since the 1860s.²⁹ Oklahoma Territory's statute grandfathered in, just like much of the rest of the penal code. On December 10, 1890, 2nd Council District member James L. Brown introduced Council Bill 99, entitled "An Act to Provide a Penal Code for the Territory of Oklahoma." The first Oklahoma Territorial legislature was undoubtedly under a great deal of pressure to establish a workable, uniform system of government after over a year of virtual chaos. Delegates borrowed heavily from the civil and penal codes of other state governments, in this case from the penal statutes of the Dakota Territory. Large portions of the compiled laws of Dakota Territory were copied verbatim, including the crimes against nature statute. It read, simply:

Every person who is guilty of the detestable and abominable crime against nature, committed with mankind or with a beast, is punishable by imprisonment in the penitentiary not exceeding ten years...Any sexual penetration, however slight, is sufficient to complete the crime against nature.

Council Bill 99 passed with little debate in both houses of the Oklahoma Territorial legislature, sailed through the appropriate committees, and was signed by Governor George Steele, all within a period of two weeks.³⁰

²⁹ Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 202-206. Statutes against sodomy had been in effect since 1853 in Oregon, Idaho in 1864, and Montana in 1865. The Oregon legislature tightened the language of their statute following the infamous homosexual scandal of 1912 in Portland, and a general Progressive Era trend to strengthen sex-related offenses between same-sex lovers was underway all over the United States. George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 140, notes that sodomy laws in New York had been in place since 1796. The laws were strictly enforced between 1880-1920, as a local child welfare reform group pushed for stiffer sentences.

³⁰ *Journal of the First Session of the Legislative Assembly of Oklahoma Territory, Beginning August 27, 1890* (Guthrie, O.T.: Oklahoma News Publishing Company, 1890), 783; *The Compiled Laws of the Territory of Dakota, 1887* (Bismarck, Dakota:

However, it would be almost thirty years before Oklahoma County tried its first case involving a violation of that statute. The reason for this is unclear. Since the Oklahoma penal statutes were copied almost verbatim from the Dakota Statutes, at a time of great chaos in Oklahoma government, seeking to punish those engaging in sodomy was probably not a high priority and the law gathered dust for decades. Another reason for the dearth in sodomy prosecutions before 1920 was how difficult it could be to sustain such a charge. Without eyewitnesses, prosecutors needed one of the two people involved to turn on the other, which amounted to a public disclosure that they engaged in that kind of behavior. Authorities probably allowed the men to plead guilty to a lesser misdemeanor charge, pay a fine, and move on to clear the docket if nothing else. In any case, the 1920s saw a number of sodomy prosecutions in Oklahoma County District Court, and an acceleration of prosecutions in the 1930s, and these are crucial in outlining the gay male world in Oklahoma City before World War II. Those that survive paint a useful picture of both legal and community reactions to same-sex love, and illustrate that queer men navigated the social and economic terrain in Oklahoma City with some aplomb well before this would seem plausible in conventional historical narratives.

In the summer of 1920, authorities charged Anderson King with two counts of committing the crime against nature. That July, King had a sexual contact with Jessee Harris, a minor, and in August of 1920 with Edgar Blackwell, also a minor. King was held in lieu of \$3000 in bail. County Attorney O.A. Cargill prosecuted both cases, and he allowed Jessee Harris to testify at the Blackwell trial. Facing two counts of sodomy, and after seeing that young Harris likely would provide damning testimony, King pled

1887), Chapter 31, sections 6544-6548; *The Statutes of Oklahoma, 1890* (Guthrie, O.T.: State Capital Publishing, 1891).

guilty and received a two-year sentence at the Oklahoma penitentiary from Judge T.F. Donnell.³¹

Only a few months later, Ruben Lawson was charged in Oklahoma County with committing a “venereal affair,” and that he did “carnally know” one Will Peters, a fourteen-year-old mulatto boy. Lawson was African-American, which probably affected the way his case was handled in the Oklahoma judicial system. Listed as witnesses were Miss Julie Glover, C.W. Winfield, and Peters, all of whom testified that Lawson sodomized the boy. Lawson likely knew his fate was sealed, and he changed his plea to guilty. He received a two-year sentence at the Granite Reformatory. Apparently, Lawson was a perennial lawbreaker. After he served his first sentence at Granite, Lawson was convicted in Oklahoma County district court in 1923 for stealing over \$38 worth of women’s apparel from the Herskowitz Dry Goods shop. He served one year, and returned for another two-year stint at McAlester following a burglary conviction in 1924.³²

Raymond C. Guy was another man charged in Oklahoma County with sodomy, twice in less than a month. Trouble seemed to follow Guy. Born in Missouri in 1896, Guy was a painter and general laborer, but he was not afraid to look outside the law to

³¹ State v. Anderson King, case #4663 and #4669, 13th District Court, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. Records available at the Oklahoma Historical Society, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Oklahoma City (hereafter cited as OHS). See Appendix Five, a “Note on Sources” for more detailed information on these records; 1920 Oklahoma Census, Oklahoma County, Enumeration District 118, sheet 16b. Harris lived with his aunt and uncle.

³² State v. Ruben Lawson, case #4802, 13th District Court, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma (OHS). For the robbery charges, see State v. Ruben Lawson, case #5534 (8/14/1923) and #5755 (8/8/1924), 13th District Court, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; Peters was listed as a mulatto on the Oklahoma City 1920 census (1920 Oklahoma Census, Oklahoma County, Enumeration District 144, sheet 20a, stamped page number 91).

supplement his income. In December 1915, he and a friend, Roy Spencer, were charged with the attempted murder of Oklahoma County Sheriff Deputy James Karnes. Karnes was injured in a shootout with Spencer and Guy while trying to apprehend them following a lengthy crime spree, which included various assaults and robberies all over Oklahoma County. They were given ten-year sentences for the attempt on Karnes's life. On February 14, 1925, Raymond C. Guy forcibly sodomized one Robert Voerster, a minor boy, according to his father, Robert, who signed the complaint. Guy was held on \$5000 bond initially, but he must have made bail, for three months later on May 28, 1925, he attempted to rape a nine-year-old girl named Jewel Wehran. Apparently, he was interrupted by a neighbor, C.E. Barker, and unable fully to assault the young girl. The Oklahoma County Attorney's office chose to try Guy on the attempted rape charge instead of the forcible sodomy charge. This was probably because the young girl represented a more sympathetic focus point for a jury. It might also have had something to do with the fact that the complaint was sworn in February, but Guy was not officially charged until April of 1925, a time gap that a defense attorney would attack. Guy was convicted on the rape charge and because he had previous felony convictions, was sentenced to seven years in the Oklahoma penitentiary.³³

In July of 1923, one of the first cases of adult-to-adult same-sex behavior was prosecuted in Oklahoma County. On July 4th, Archie Wilson and Blaine Hathaway probably enjoyed the annual holiday events the city offered, such as fireworks at Wheeler Park and any number of community ice cream socials and private celebrations.

³³ 1920 State of Oklahoma Census, Oklahoma County, Enumeration District 162, sheet 13b; State v. R.C. Guy, case #5893 and #5894, 13th District Court, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma (OHS); State v. Roy Spencer and R.C. Guy, case #3847, 13th District Court, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma.

Sweltering temperatures and the liquor both men consumed likely produced euphoria. Where the two went after the evening's festivities concluded is unknown, but it likely was John Arlett's South Broadway rooming house where Wilson lived, given that Hathaway lived with his parents. Wilson was a laborer at the local Wilson packing house, which employed a large number of residents in Oklahoma City. Hathaway, of course, was a neer-do-well who found trouble with authorities easily.³⁴ Whatever the situation, Hathaway and Wilson had some kind of consensual sexual activity that evening, according to witnesses W.M. Cavanor and Ida Conwell. Wilson and Hathaway were arrested, charged, and convicted by July 6th with sodomy, "unnatural copulation one with the other." Judge O.L. Price sentenced Wilson, a man with no known record, to a term of five years in the Oklahoma Penitentiary. Blaine Hathaway was given the full sentence under the Oklahoma sodomy law – ten years -- also at McAlester. Both men appealed their convictions, and Judge Price denied both appeals.³⁵

A number of other sodomy cases handled in the 1920s developed much as did the earlier ones. In 1926, Charles "Speedy" Brown, a Massachusetts-born salesman with a local pipe company, was charged with committing sodomy on Fannie Donaldson, a woman who apparently suffered from some kind of psychological or emotional problem. Prosecutors charged and tried both of them separately for the crime, and guilty verdicts followed. Brown went to McAlester for three years, and authorities confined Donaldson

³⁴ For Wilson, see 1920 Oklahoma County Census, Ward 3, pct. 16, ED 155, Sheet 13b; for Hathaway, same source, pct. 6, ED 161, sheet 20a.

³⁵ State v. Wilson and Hathaway, case #5396, 13th District Court, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma (OHS).

to a local sanitarium, where she spent the next eight months.³⁶ Ed Woods received a three-year sentence for sodomizing Ellis Meeks, an eleven-year-old boy in 1927, and authorities dismissed two other cases for lack of a complaining witness. In one of the more bizarre cases, E.H. Felder pled guilty to having sex with his bulldog in September of 1928. Judge Sam Hooker sentenced Felder to fifteen months in the state penitentiary.³⁷

On the surface, this brief examination of sodomy trials in Oklahoma City in the 1920s indicates that authorities treated consensual adult male same-sex activities more harshly than what today would be considered pedophilia, but the nuances inherent in describing adult-juvenile sexual relationships in the U.S., post-1900, cloud such a generalization. Peter Boag's study of the Pacific Northwest illustrates that adult-juvenile sexual contacts -- especially among the working class -- were more common before middle-class, Progressive-era social reform movements began policing the exploitation of children in earnest. Young men frequently initiated sexual liaisons with older men for any number of reasons -- economic or physical security, genuine sexual attraction, or to meet an emotional need.³⁸ It is impossible to know the true intentions of any participant in these sodomy cases, adult or juvenile, but it seems certain that authorities brought their values and conceptualizations of adult-juvenile/adolescent sexuality to bear on these cases, and these values were decidedly white, middle-class, and male. With the

³⁶ State v. Charles Brown, case #6254, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; 1930 Oklahoma Census, Oklahoma City, 3rd Ward; State v. Fannie Donaldson, case #6258, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. Donaldson was released from the sanitarium in June of 1927.

³⁷ State v. Ed Woods, Case #6421 (April 1927), Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; State v. Arly Holman, case #6589, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma (October 1927); State v. E.H. Felder, case #6803 (September 1928), Oklahoma County, Oklahoma.

³⁸ Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 8-9, 27-32.

exception of the Wilson-Hathaway and Brown-Donaldson trials, all of these cases involved same-sex activities between adults and minors, crimes that would seem serious enough to merit a harsh sentence. Yet, in the King and Lawson cases, each defendant received only a two-year sentence, and King was a repeat offender. Even “Speedy” Brown’s sentence of three years for oral sex with an adult female matched the sentence meted out to Ed Woods for sex with a younger boy. The adult-juvenile offenders had lower bail amounts and shorter sentences, even if they were repeat offenders. Yet in the Wilson-Hathaway case, it should be noted that Blaine Hathaway was a perennial lawbreaker, someone who gave the Oklahoma City police department headaches running liquor, committing violent acts, and burglarizing businesses. By all accounts Wilson was a model citizen, one who had a good job at the Wilson packing plant. Wilson’s association with Hathaway likely made his sentence longer. However the fact that this case involved consenting adults, engaged in same-sex behavior, and the community reacted so quickly and forcefully, says a great deal about how queer sex was criminalized at an early date. It also explains why discretion was a must among same-sex lovers.

During the 1930s, prosecutions for sodomy in Oklahoma City and Oklahoma County became more common. In fact, there were twenty-six cases prosecuted in Oklahoma County between 1930 and 1939, compared to only twelve cases for all of the 1920s. In addition, more of the cases involved male adult-adult and male adult-adolescent sexual activities than was true earlier. One possible explanation for the increase in prosecutions was the rapid population growth in Oklahoma City -- over 120,000 residents moved to Oklahoma City between 1917 and 1930. Another explanation could be the determination by county attorneys to fully prosecute sodomy

charges. One Oklahoma County attorney, Draper Grigsby, prosecuted almost all of the adult-to-adult same-sex sodomy cases from Oklahoma City in the 1930s.³⁹

In February of 1930, authorities charged D. Johnson with forcibly committing the crime against nature on G. Henry Dismuke. This case was a bit unusual in that Dismuke signed the complaint personally, meaning he initiated the investigation with police, and apparently he was the only witness called by the prosecution. Dismuke lived at 312 ½ West California, a rooming house, and worked at the New Empire Hotel at 234 South Broadway, so it is unlikely he used the Century Rooms, located only two blocks from his residence, for a place to sleep. According to the remaining case documents, Johnson allegedly forced himself on Dismuke, a charge vehemently denied by Johnson's attorney. The judge subpoenaed the guest register of the Century Rooms, which suggests that at issue was whether Johnson or Dismuke rented the room and might indicate that Dismuke initiated the sexual act, whether for money or pleasure. The jury found Johnson not guilty, and both men fade from the historical record.⁴⁰

In June of 1932, the most extensive sodomy prosecution to date occurred in Oklahoma County. Little is known about the accused, Al Bumbrey, other than that he was charged with three counts of sodomy in what was apparently a series of sex acts involving at least three other men. On the 25th of June, Bumbrey allegedly "inserted his penis into the rectums" of both DeWitt Stevenson and Frank Johnson, and "took into his

³⁹ Trial statistics taken from list compiled in Appendix B; See also Blackburn, *Heart of the Promised Land*, 114, 127, for population statistics. Oklahoma City's population increased from about 60,000 in 1917 to 185,389 in 1930.

⁴⁰ State v. Johnson, case #7461, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma Felony Court Records (OHS).

mouth” the penis of Charles Elliot. These were unprecedented cases, in that all involved different suspects, and all three crimes occurred on the same day, possibly even at the same time. Apparently, all of the sex acts were consensual, in that Bumbrey was both an active and passive participant, which makes the disposition of these cases important to ascertain how the legal system viewed same-sex activity. Assistant County Attorney Draper Grigsby tried Bumbrey, this time before Justice of the Peace Ernest Lippert. Despite their own involvement in the crimes, all three men who participated in the sex acts testified against Bumbrey, and the witness list also included four more city residents and various police personnel. No felony counts were filed against the others, possibly in exchange for their testimony. Given that it only took three days from the time the sex acts occurred until Bumbrey was charged and found guilty, this case was one that authorities took seriously. The transcripts were then sent to district court for sentencing, where Judge Sam Hooker gave Bumbrey three ten-year sentences, one on each count, to be served concurrently.⁴¹

Whether this sentence was warranted is open to debate, but it was not out of line with other sentences handed down in state court sodomy cases involving members of the opposite sex, or adults with children. Fred Ackerman faced two counts of sodomy and one count of first-degree rape for having sexual relationships with two of his minor daughters. County attorney William Ridge prosecuted the cases, which were apparently very strong and included testimony from three of Ackerman’s daughters. After waiving a preliminary hearing and pleading guilty, Ackerman received two ten-year sentences for

⁴¹ State v. Al M. Bumbrey, case # 8717, 8718, and 8719, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma Felony Court Records (OHS).

sodomy, and a twenty-five-year sentence for rape. All sentences were served concurrently, and all were the maximum for their crime.⁴² Another case in 1932 involved forcible sodomy, again between two male residents, but one was an eight-year-old boy. Arlie Holman allegedly forced himself on Francis Brooks on May 27, 1932. Witnesses were H.W. Harrell and his son Aubrey, with whom Brooks lived. This was not the first time that Holman was charged with sodomy. In 1927, Holman allegedly sodomized a five-year-old boy, but charges were dismissed when the boy refused to cooperate in Holman's prosecution. Assistant County Attorney Draper Grigsby prosecuted Holman and sought the maximum penalty for sodomy – ten years -- and received that when the jury returned a guilty verdict.⁴³

In another case, a city resident and an unknown accomplice attempted to sodomize Tom Treadwell. On September 17, 1933, Jimmie Payne and John Doe “tried to insert their penises into the mouth of Tom Treadwell.” Where the act occurred is unknown, but the trial was held on September 20, only three days after the crime occurred. Payne pled not guilty, but the testimony of Treadwell was compelling. The jury returned a guilty verdict, and Judge R.P. Hill sentenced Payne to five years in prison, the maximum penalty for attempted sodomy in Oklahoma at the time.⁴⁴

⁴² State v. Fred Ackerman, cases 8864-8866, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma Felony Court Records (OHS).

⁴³ State v. Arlie Holman, case #8685, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma Felony Court Records (OHS); 1930 Oklahoma Census, Oklahoma County, Enumeration District 55-141, sheet 9b. See State v. Arly Holman, case #6589, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma (October 1927) for details of the earlier charges.

⁴⁴ State v. Jimmie Payne and John Doe, case #9351, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma Felony Court Records (OHS).

In January of 1934, Jack Cloud committed the crime against nature with one Edward Chambers, an eighteen-year-old Oklahoma City resident fresh out of the Sand Springs Home for Boys. Chambers was young, with no visible means of support, and he had a criminal record. Perhaps like Blaine Hathaway, Chambers trolled the streets hustling downtown. The fifty-three-year-old Cloud fit the profile of most of the other men prosecuted in Oklahoma County for sodomy since the 1920s -- he was a laborer, specifically a bricklayer, he lived alone in a boarding house near the downtown strip, and he apparently had no resources with which to hire an attorney.⁴⁵ Once again, Draper Grigsby prosecuted the case, which was held only three days after charges were sworn by County Attorney Mart Brown. This case might have involved consensual sex, given that the County Attorney swore out the complaint instead of a party involved. The witness list included Chambers and four male neighbors who lived on Southwest 11th in Oklahoma City. Grigsby reluctantly dismissed charges against Cloud when authorities failed to locate Edward Chambers to testify.⁴⁶

On the surface, in the 1930s the fines and sentences for male same-sex sexuality were not any more punitive than those given to sex crimes involving adults and children, regardless of the victim's gender. It was probably obvious to gay and bisexual men that they had much to fear, however, as conviction of sodomy in state court -- regardless of the circumstances -- meant a sentence to the penitentiary. Draper Grigsby often prosecuted sodomy offenses in general, and he prosecuted every single same-sex adult sodomy case

⁴⁵ For information on Chambers, see 1930 Oklahoma Census, Tulsa County, Wekiwa Township, Enumeration District 72-180, sheet 1b; For information on Cloud, see 1930 Oklahoma Census, Oklahoma County, Enumeration District 55-121, sheet 2b.

⁴⁶ State v. Jack Cloud, case #9477, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma Felony Court Records (OHS).

in Oklahoma County while he served as assistant county attorney. Grigsby first became an assistant county attorney in 1930 after only a few years in private practice. He was thirty-three-years-old in 1930, with a wife and small child. No doubt his youth and ambition made him a fiery prosecutor, and he used a common procedural tool when prosecuting defendants for sodomy---turn one of the two parties against the other by offering immunity for their testimony. Grigsby apparently offered exactly that to Edward Chambers, Charles Elliot, DeWitt Stevenson, and Frank Johnson, all of whom were adults, and all of whom willingly participated in the sex acts by all accounts. They were, in essence, accomplices. Their testimony made the difference in each trial that Grigsby prosecuted. To be fair, many of these witnesses possibly offered testimony out of fear. Hoping to keep their records clean and avoid even more embarrassment, the men chose to implicate others as the instigators. While it might seem a bit unseemly, such behavior could speak to the fear that queer men shared about having their sexuality discovered in Oklahoma City.

That fear, if that was a motivating factor, was rather real as men charged with sodomy in Oklahoma County certainly received little mercy from prosecutors. According to Table One, they received even less from judges. Of the forty cases of sodomy prosecuted in Oklahoma County between 1920 and 1940, the average sentence for all of those convicted, regardless of circumstances, was 5.7 years. The sentences for sodomy cases involving consenting male adults was identical to the total average of 5.7 years. Judge Sam Hooker heard fifteen of the forty cases prosecuted, the highest by far of any other district judge, and his sentences were slightly higher overall at 6.05 years, while his sentences for same-sex sodomy cases were lower at 5.28 years. An interesting

aspect of the data gleaned from Oklahoma County sodomy prosecutions was that cases involving adult men and minor boys actually received lighter sentences than adult-adult sodomy suspects, and sodomy between adult men and minor girls received the harshest sentence of all, by almost three years.

Table 1

Sentence Data for Sodomy Cases in Oklahoma County,
1889-1940

Parties Involved	Number of cases	Percent of Total	Avg. Sentence
Male Adult, Male Adult	14	35%	5.7 years
Male Adult, Female Minor	12	30%	8.5 years
Male Adult, Male Minor	11	27.5%	3.7 years
Male Adult, Animal	2	5%	1.5 years
Male Adult, Female Adult	1	2.5%	3.0 years
<hr/>			
TOTALS	40	100%	5.7 years

Nor did queer men receive much leeway from police, who probably looked at male gender and sexual nonconformity in a negative way. In 1907, schoolteacher J.A. Baker had his teaching certificate revoked by the Oklahoma County superintendent of instruction for impersonating a woman. Before coming to Oklahoma in 1906, Baker had been an administrator and educator in Iowa and Kansas. Because of his feminine features and appearance, Baker had lost good jobs in both states, as well as in Guthrie and Edmond in Oklahoma. He was fired from his position in Harrah, Oklahoma, in 1907

once again for donning a dress and makeup and trying to pass as a woman. Baker's wife, who was also a schoolteacher, had her contract renewed despite the controversy.⁴⁷

The arrest of Raymond Guy and his friend Roy Spencer for attempting to kill an Oklahoma County sheriff deputy also reminds us that being different, not hewing to community expectations regarding gender or sexuality, would generate a negative response. After eluding authorities for some time, Guy and Spencer were arrested by Oklahoma City police officers while the pair walked along the 400 block of South Broadway. The arresting officer noted that "the little one (Spencer) looks like the 'sissy guy' of the pair, but he is the dangerous one of the two."⁴⁸ That comment may or may not indicate that Spencer and Guy shared a romantic attachment, but it is certainly instructive as to how non-normative male gender behavior was viewed by police. Spencer, by his smallish, feminine appearance was a "sissy" to the officer, and his ruthlessness was out of character, not what the officer expected. Guy and Spencer received ten-year sentences for the Karnes shooting. How Spencer's effeminate mannerisms and behavior affected the outcome of the trial is unknown, but they certainly did not help his cause with the police.

This was also true for a young man arrested in 1927 by former Oklahoma City police sergeant J.W. Berry. That September, Berry was riding in a city street car near Grand and Broadway when a suspicious looking woman caught his attention. Sixteen-year-old Migelle Gibson -- decked out in full drag, including "unmentionables" -- boarded the car, his destination unknown. Berry stopped the trolley and immediately

⁴⁷ "Man Schoolmarm Is Out of a Job," *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/6/1907, 7.

⁴⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/22/1915, 8

took Gibson to police headquarters. Gibson argued that it simply was all part of a dare, which might have been more persuasive if it had not been apparent that he was wearing female undergarments and makeup too. The police took the matter very seriously, however, and held Gibson for investigation, a process usually reserved for sex arrests. A telling aspect of this incident revolved around the fact that Berry was no longer affiliated with the police department at the time he arrested Gibson. He was then serving as Oklahoma County clerk and had no authority whatsoever to detain Gibson, yet he did.⁴⁹

Men engaged in non-normative gender behavior, to say nothing of unconventional sexual behavior, were thus subject to serious repercussions. J.A. Baker lost his professional credentials, which seriously hampered his ability to make a living. Baker's occupation, as an educator who worked with young people, made him an easy target. Any sort of perceived effeminacy or moral failing would automatically exclude him from the classroom. Raymond Guy already faced serious charges for being an accomplice in a shooting involving a peace officer, but his association with a "sissy boy," Roy Spencer, likely made a bad situation worse. Migelle Gibson had the details of his arrest plastered across the front page of the *Daily Oklahoman*, which probably caused him, or his family, a great deal of embarrassment. In all of these cases, the public humiliation was by design. By printing their names and addresses in the newspaper, the Oklahoma City police and community leaders hoped to dissuade other men from following their example, as well as mete out humiliation fit for stepping outside of accepted gender and sexual norms.

⁴⁹ "'Maid' Is Arrested By County Clerk." *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/13/1927, page 1.

The same cannot be said for women in Oklahoma City, however, as the case of long-time cross dresser and Oklahoma City jazz musician Dorothy “Billy” Tipton illustrates. Just as the seedier side of life, namely bootlegging and prostitution, brought people of varying backgrounds and sexual appetites together and allowed them a modicum of public privacy, so too did the jazz and nightclub scene that emerged in Oklahoma City during the late 1920s. Tipton was born in Oklahoma City to passionate, unstable parents and grew up fast, moving around a lot and suffering the slings of poverty. What helped young Dorothy gain a sense of purpose and escape the doldrums of her station was music, any music. In the early 1930s, while living with her needy mother in one of the low-rent hotels downtown, Tipton actively sought work as a saxophone and piano player in a number of clubs and speakeasies but was usually turned away, the product of Depression-era underemployment and her gender -- some musicians did not feel comfortable working with female band members. This led Dorothy to morph into Billy, a smallish but talented male musician and bandleader who spent the next five decades performing in clubs all over the West Coast. Billy married at least five times, adopted children, and created an illusion of masculinity that was so successful none of his wives suspected he was a woman, a fact discovered only after Billy’s death in Spokane, Washington, in 1989.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998). Middlebrook has difficulty deciding where Tipton belonged on the scale of gender non-conformity---whether it was a psychosocial phenomenon or merely a means to a professional end, one that spiraled as she aged. Although Tipton dressed as a man but did not change her gender identity while living in Oklahoma City, she applied for a social security card as a man and fooled several women into thinking she was male, both of which clearly indicate that she had antithetical notions of her gender and sexuality that transcended professional considerations.

What is pertinent to this investigation is that Billy Tipton worked as a man, presented herself as a man in private life by the mid-1930s, lived with a rather notorious and gregarious woman named Non Earl Harrell, and a number of Oklahoma City residents knew this was the case and accepted it. Tipton had a friend, Mary Louise “Buck” Thomason, the daughter of a local radio station owner that allowed Billy and friends to play live on KFXR, who also wore men’s clothing and had girlfriends and lived a life of reckless abandon. One might expect that the sight of these two, girlfriends on each arm, must have elicited a negative reaction in Oklahoma City, yet exactly the opposite was the case. Those who did not know for sure about Tipton and Buck’s sexuality never cared enough to ask. Musicians who shared stage time with Billy and knew Buck said that they never gave much thought to their need to present themselves as men. As Wayne Benson, a bass player who worked with Billy in Oklahoma City between 1936 and 1938 recalled, “Well, there again, it was common knowledge, you know, with the band and the guys and everything, that she was a female...To me there was nothing wrong with her. I really didn’t see anything unusual...Really, no one thought anything about it around here.”⁵¹ That this degree of gender and sexual non-conformity existed in Oklahoma City, and was met with as little interest as it did in the entertainment and red light districts, indicates that the boundaries of what constituted normative sexuality in Oklahoma City was wider overall than one might expect.

Despite the risks, queer Oklahoma City residents boldly expressed their sexuality, sought out friends and partners, even in the face of assured prison time. From the early days of its founding, Oklahoma City had been a place where unconventional personal

⁵¹ Ibid., 67-93. Benson quote taken from page 92.

behavior and sexuality might be expressed with little more than a headshake. The whirlwind growth and construction booms brought a large number of unattached men to the downtown area, into a world of inexpensive rooming houses and hotels, where they lived in an environment largely devoid of women. This gave gay men the opportunity and the means with which to pursue sex with other men. As a result of meager budgets and the Oklahoma City community's expectation that liquor and prostitution would be major issues for authorities, the police department and county attorneys focused on the more obvious examples of wrongdoing. The dearth of sodomy prosecutions in Oklahoma County until the 1920s, despite the fact that the anti-sodomy law had been in effect for almost thirty years, suggests that an atmosphere existed where queer men might explore their sexuality and build nascent community networks. When prosecutions for crime against nature occurred, starting in the 1920s, those engaging in same-sex activity with other adult men did not elicit harsher sentences or treatment than those convicted of having sexual contact with children. In fact, they often received shorter sentences than pedophiles. This indicates that it was the crime of sodomy that motivated authorities to prosecute offenders, rather than the sexuality of those involved, a finding that is consistent with other historians' findings on the social construction of sexuality in the United States before World War II. In any case, queer men risked almost a guaranteed sentence in the Oklahoma State Penitentiary if caught making love to another man. How and why a more vibrant gay and bisexual male subculture developed in Oklahoma City, in spite of this, is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter III
The Downtown Mecca:
Public Expressions of Private Passions

Jim was a good kid who came from a strong, proud Cherokee family. He attended Classen High School during the day and took a streetcar downtown to his after-hours job at the post office. One can assume that Jim enjoyed the sense of freedom and independence that his job offered, even if he did not relish the work. After work, Jim again boarded a bus and traveled back home. As the bus lumbered through the downtown area of Oklahoma City after dark, Jim looked out of his window and saw men walking the streets, talking to one another, and socializing. Most of the men likely were heading to bars, taking in shows at the popular downtown theaters, or going home from work just like Jim. Perhaps some searched for prostitutes, as the downtown area was a central hub for the flesh trade in Oklahoma City. A number of men, however, sought out other men in order to enjoy a furtive sexual encounter. Jim found this to be true one evening as he strolled down Grand Avenue, his curiosity piqued. At the Criterion, one of Oklahoma City's most opulent theaters, the night janitor persuaded Jim into accompanying him to the balcony for sex. The year was 1944.¹

¹ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/17/2005. Interview participants for this project were recruited via advertisements placed in the *Gayly Oklahoman* and *Hard News Online*, as well as by referral. Participants were interviewed about their experiences in Oklahoma City using a script, which is included in the appendix. Most of the interviews were audiotaped, although some telephone interviews

From the end of World War II until the 1960s, downtown Oklahoma City was crawling with men looking for sex, offering sex, and engaging in sex. Queer men enjoyed furtive, anonymous encounters in public restrooms and theaters, socialized in relative comfort at a number of bars, and cruised for sex rather brazenly along Grand Avenue and Main Street without attracting too much attention from the police or community leaders. Oklahoma in general is perceived as an evangelical, conservative state, a place where “alternative lifestyles” are viewed with suspicion at the very least.² That this level of openness existed, or that a gay subculture operated at all there,

and email interviews occurred. While some of the participants chose to use their real identities, most preferred to remain anonymous. The author currently retains records of these interviews.

² Everybody interviewed mentioned some way that religion had “touched” their lives, and a few studies have noted how religious Oklahomans are in general. Historical geographers have done a fine job of mapping out the dimensions of American religious fervor, exploring everything from church membership to the popularity of evangelical religious television programs. One of the most general and important works was Wilbur Zelinsky, “An Approach to the Religious Geography of the United States: Patterns in Church Membership in 1952.” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 51 (1961): 139-167, an article that divided the United States into religious regions based on church membership. James T. Shortridge followed these up with two articles, “A New Regionalization of American Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 16 (1977): 143-153, and “Patterns of Religion in the United States,” *Geographical Review* 66 (1976): 420-434. Shortridge places Oklahoma in the interminably large southern region, which is marked off by high proportions of church attendance to total population, as well as the prevalence of Southern Baptist denominations, traditionally one of the most conservative sects of American Christianity. His ultimate conclusion, however, describes Oklahoma City as “marginal” in being classified as the “buckle” of the Bible Belt. Other important works include Samuel S. Hill, “Religion and Region in America,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 480 (July 1985): 132-141; Roger Stump, “Religious Divergence in Religious Affiliation in the United States,” *Sociological Analysis* 45 (Winter 1984); Charles Heatwole, “The Bible Belt: A Problem in Regional Definition,” *Journal of Geography* 77 (February 1978): 50-55; Stephen W. Tweedie, “Viewing the Bible Belt,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (Spring 1978): 865-876. Ultimately, the criteria used to judge the “religiosity” of particularly areas affected how scholars described the regionalization of North American religion. In all of these studies, Oklahoma is portrayed as a predominantly conservative, evangelical state.

challenges the belief that Oklahoma City in particular, and Oklahoma in general, were bastions of intolerance. It should also encourage historians to look more closely at the social and sexual dynamics of queer subcultures in the western U.S., outside of the Pacific Coast.

For many gay and bisexual men, the 1940s and 1950s were exciting times. Soldiers returned from World War II having visited places where people enjoyed their sexuality more freely and with less denigration than in the United States. Traveling to boot camp and fighting in either the European or Pacific Theater represented the first excursions some men made outside of their hometowns. Many gay men realized for the first time that others “like them” existed. The widespread use of penicillin extinguished once potentially fatal diseases like syphilis, or kept annoying ones like gonorrhea under control.³ The Kinsey Reports, published in 1948 and 1953, described for the first time the extent to which Americans had engaged in some kind of homosexual behavior, and the numbers shocked people. At least one-half of the male respondents reported having an erotic response to another man, and at least one-third had a sexual encounter, after puberty, with another man that led to orgasm. Most shocking, 1 out of 8---over 12%---admitted being exclusively homosexual for a significant portion of their adult life. The Kinsey Report showed, in scientific detail, that homosexuality, or homosexual behavior, was more prevalent than previously assumed.⁴

³ Allen Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

⁴ Charles Kaiser, *The Gay Metropolis, 1940-1996* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 119. Kinsey statistics are from John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 291-292.

A dark current, or backlash, tempered this newfound openness and optimism, one that threatened to derail careers, ruin reputations, and destroy any semblance of self-worth enjoyed by gay and bisexual men in many larger metropolitan areas. David Johnson related that in the early 1950s, Washington, D.C. became the center of a “Lavender Scare” involving homosexuals in sensitive government positions. Indeed, in the minds of many Americans, being homosexual was just as dastardly and undesirable as being a communist. People lost their jobs, their reputations, and sometimes their lives.⁵ Smaller cities were involved too. Neil Miller described the arrests, the blackmailed confessions, and the general abuse of civil rights suffered by over twenty gay men in Sioux City, Iowa, following the murder investigations of two young children. Many of those arrested were homosexuals, a fact that branded them “sexual psychopaths” by medical and legal authorities and led to lengthy stays in a local mental hospital.⁶ Another panic, in Boise, Idaho, evolved after the discovery in 1955 of an alleged “homosexual ring,” which included several pedophiles. Authorities charged that all of those arrested were pedophiles when in fact most were simply gay or bisexual. Seven men to prison, all from the lower classes of society, and the politics and viciousness of life in 1950s small-town America was laid bare.⁷

⁵ David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁶ Neil Miller, *Sex-Crime Panic: A Journey to the Paranoid Heart of the 1950s* (New York: Alyson Books, 2002). Miller’s book is terribly depressing, especially his discussion of the men involved being shipped to a mental hospital and forced to say and do the “right” things to get released.

⁷ John Gerassi, *The Boys of Boise: Furor, Vice, and Folly in an American City* (New York: Macmillan, 1966). Gerassi, then an editor at *Time*, met resistance from police, townspeople, and even the Governor of Idaho when writing the book. He does admit

As the research on Oklahoma City will illustrate, no widespread campaigns against gay and bisexual men, on that scale, occurred. Certainly the community responded from time to time to reports of sexual degeneracy or perversion in the downtown area, and events conspired in the 1960s to make Oklahoma City less hospitable for the queer male subculture than ever before, but in regard to the 1950s Oklahoma City's gay and bisexual male subculture did not adhere to the national standard. This also suggests that it was easier at times being gay in Oklahoma City than in historically queer capitals like New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, or Washington, D.C. Queer men carved out a sphere of public sexuality in downtown Oklahoma City that provided them with opportunities for sex and a modicum of privacy in public. By openly expressing their sexuality in bars, parks, restrooms, and other public places, gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents gained valuable social and psychological nourishment and yet remained shielded from public scorn.⁸

that some of those arrested were pedophiles, but argues that hysteria and the politics of retribution allowed the situation to get out of hand.

⁸ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 180-205, 331-354. The concept of public privacy is an old one, but Chauncey applies that to gay men in New York in the 1920s. He also portrays the 1930s and early 1940s as a time of decline, when the gay subculture retreated to the closet in the face of an official crackdown; Marc Stein, *The City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 49-51, 155-176. Stein places violence and organized crackdowns as being especially acute in the 1950s and early 1960s; Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 57, 96, 115-133. Boyd shows that the crackdown on gay bars and nightspots started during World War II, with the military's preoccupation with vice near military bases, and continued and escalated throughout the 1950s after the San Francisco political establishment became involved; Brett Beemyn, "A Queer Capital: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Life in Washington, D.C., 1890-1955." (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1997), 196-216. For Beemyn, Washington, D.C. had always been somewhat strident in policing gay men, but the mid-1940s to the late 1950s saw the

In the early 1940s, Oklahoma City was a bustling metropolis with over 200,000 inhabitants.⁹ From a sexual standpoint, Oklahoma City's downtown area ran south of Main Street and north of Reno, east to Santa Fe and west to Walker Avenue. These boundaries were not absolute of course, but much of the male-to-male sexual activity exercised in public occurred here, and it occurred right under the authorities' noses, both civil and religious. At this juncture, the downtown area was crowded with people, as department stores, bars, restaurants, theaters, and private clubs existed in abundance. Like many cities west of the Mississippi River, Oklahoma City emerged from the Great Depression and enjoyed an economic expansion thanks to the start of World War II. By 1941, the federal government was spending over \$30 million annually in Oklahoma City in defense contracts and related expenditures, an income boost that meant jobs and steady paychecks, money that was recycled into the local economy time and again.¹⁰ Will Rogers Field in Oklahoma City was home to the Army Air Corps, which was a precursor to the U.S. Air Force. Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Navy built a \$4.5 million dollar reserve aviation base on property leased from the University of Oklahoma in Norman. Indeed, construction of Max Westheimer Field finished in record time.¹¹ Fort Sill, located in Lawton, Oklahoma, housed the Army infantry during the Korean

"most extensive and well-organized police crackdowns," replete with a sense of "moral anxiety" that previous raids lacked.

⁹ Roy P. Stewart, *Born Grown: The Story of Oklahoma City* (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank, National Association, 1974), 248. The 1940 population was officially 204,517, which represented an increase of about 10% from the 1930 figure of 185,389.

¹⁰ Bob L. Blackburn, *Heart of the Promised Land: Oklahoma County, An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications, 1982), 155.

¹¹ "Navy to Rush Norman Base." *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/22/1942.

War. It was only about an hour and a half from Oklahoma City by bus. In 1941, the Army Air Corps agreed to locate a major air depot on Southeast 29th Street. That \$14 million depot became Tinker Field, employed over 3500 workers, and made the Oklahoma City metropolitan area one of the most important cogs in the military industrial complex.¹² Overall, the construction, employment, and corollary industries associated with the bases brought over 40,000 new residents to Oklahoma City by 1943, a 20% increase in total population in only three years.

Abundant opportunities existed for military men on leave to find a drink, a show, or sex in Oklahoma City. In fact, soldiers from Will Rogers Field frequented the downtown area often, if military orders restricting the servicemen's travels are any indication. In November of 1941, just a few short weeks before U.S. entry into World War II, headquarters banned soldiers from Will Rogers Field from a seven-block area bordered by Reno and California, and from the Santa Fe railroad to Dewey Avenue. Military police officers, a contingent of which patrolled the district on their own, arrested any soldier found in the out-of-bounds area immediately and returned him to the base. The rationale for the strict order was the Oklahoma City police department's inability to control the vice and prostitution problem downtown according to Colonel DeFord, the base's commanding officer. Police Chief Frank Smith welcomed the help. "I will continue to cooperate with the government as best I can. I'm trying to make this a decent city in which to live." Within the segregated area, officers made over five hundred arrests for prostitution, some 40% of the city's annual total. In addition, over thirty

¹² Blackburn, *Heart of the Promised Land*, 155-158.

hotels and fourteen taverns operated in the zone, all of which provided ample opportunities for servicemen to engage a prostitute.¹³

At that juncture, controlling vice in Oklahoma City became a political issue with high stakes. For many years, Oklahoma City officials tried to control prostitution and liquor law violations only half-heartedly, as they lacked the manpower and resources necessary, and corruption was rampant.¹⁴ Although military officials claimed that “unescorted teenaged girls” were the focus of their intervention, curbing prostitution was the primary motivation. Shortly before the base’s order, the federal government warned municipalities that entrepreneurs who operated houses of prostitution within a certain distance from military installations would be charged with a felony, and that federal authorities would clean the areas up if the cities proved unable to do so. The federal government threatened to intervene because the rates of venereal infections at military installations in central Oklahoma allegedly were the highest in the nation.¹⁵ The Oklahoma City police department attempted to police it, eradicate it, or control it for decades to no avail. Part of the problem stemmed from the relatively painless way that authorities treated prostitutes. Prostitutes in Oklahoma City usually were charged with disorderly conduct, a broad categorization and only a misdemeanor, and fined \$20.

¹³ “Area in City Closed to Will Rogers Men,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/10/1941, 1.

¹⁴ Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 19, 22, 38, 43-52, 134-165; McRill, *And Satan Came Also*, 21-36, 74-78, 118-131, 146-170. Owens notes that police officers, in general, were underpaid with few benefits. Interview participants Gil Ray, Lance, Ralph Prevette, and Jim Fortenberry noted that payoffs to beat cops, as well as supervisors, were very common. Long-time city booster and city manager Albert McRill makes veiled references to police corruption throughout his book.

¹⁵ “Area in City Closed to Will Rogers Men,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/10/1941, 1; “Girls, Merchants Resent Seven-Block Army Ban,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/15/1941, 5; “Threat of U.S. Vice Cleanup Is Made Here,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/7/1942, 1.

Many prostitutes simply paid the fine, as contesting the charge in court often proved more expensive and troublesome than simply getting back to work.¹⁶

Because Oklahoma City hoped to secure military bases, city leaders in early 1942 stepped up efforts to curb vice found in downtown areas by instituting a fraternization law. It prohibited the sale of 3.2 percent beer, the only legally-available alcoholic beverage in Oklahoma at the time, in any public dance hall establishment, unless the dance hall was located in a hotel. It also banned the sale of beer between midnight and 7:00 AM on weeknights, and bars could not open until noon on Sunday. Violators lost their beer license and their dance hall permit, which effectively shut down their business. The rationale behind the law was simple if naive. The military personnel complained that many teenaged girls infected with gonorrhea frequented beer halls because they liked to dance, and soldiers on leave liked to drink and fraternize with young women. By dividing the entertainments completely, officials hoped to discourage fraternization, which would curtail the spread of venereal disease. The various military bases' proximity to Oklahoma City, and the city's desire to clean things up before the completion of the new naval base in Norman, made the law very popular. In addition, religious leaders, long opposed to alcohol and prostitution, promised to persuade their congregations and the public at large to support it. In fact, these ministers took advantage of the pressure Oklahoma City received from federal officials over vice to apply pressure of their own. They promised to fight the legality of selling 3.2 beer in Oklahoma, which technically was illegal by even the most liberal interpretation of the

¹⁶ "Girls, Merchants Resent Seven-Block Army Ban," *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/15/1941, 5.

Oklahoma constitution, if the law to separate liquor and dancing failed to pass.¹⁷

However, the Oklahoma legislature passed the law in 1943 and it remained in effect until the 1970s.¹⁸

The ban was not as successful as city leaders hoped, for this was not the last time that military authorities intervened in city affairs. In May 1944, military authorities declared off-limits ten hotels and twelve beer halls for allowing “unescorted” girls to frequent their establishments and book immoral dates. That brought the total number of cited establishments in the city to thirty-six. Apparently, the city ordinance passed in 1943 did not prevent a significant rise in venereal disease rates among soldiers at the base, a climb which started shortly before 1944 according to military officials.¹⁹

Apparently soldiers from the nearby military bases provided beer taverns with a large portion of their business, because less than a week after the military ban twenty-one of the thirty-six off-limits establishments signed an accord with the military to prohibit unattached girls from loitering inside.²⁰ What is interesting, however, is that Bishop’s

¹⁷ “They’re Just Standing Still At 330 Club,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/21/1942, 21; “Ten Ministers To Help City’s War on Vice,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/26/1942, 1; “Clean City...” *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/11/1942, 1; “City Ministers...,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/28/1942, 1; “Uniform-Struck Girls Blamed for Infecting Soldiers in State,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/25/1942, 18; “Law Divorcing Beer, Dancing Now in Effect,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/30/1943, 1.

¹⁸ Title 37 Oklahoma Statutes Supp. 1943, sections 211-218.

¹⁹ “City Hotels, Beer Halls Placed Off-Bounds by Military,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 12 May 1944, 1; “Stag Girl Ban Returns Beer to GIs Here,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 19 May 1944, 1.

²⁰ “They’re Just Standing Still At 330 Club,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/21/1942, 21; “Ten Ministers To Help City’s War on Vice,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/26/1942, 1; “Clean City...” *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/11/1942, 1; “City Ministers...,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/28/1942, 1; “Uniform-Struck Girls Blamed for Infecting Soldiers in State,” *Daily Oklahoman*,

Tap Room, the It'll Do Club, the Talk-of-the-Town Club, and several others that were at least gay-friendly were all on the list of offending taverns that eventually complied with the ordinance.²¹ Although some of the soldiers that spent their free time downtown in the 1940s likely were gay or bisexual, their sexuality was less important than the availability of a willing partner. As long-time city resident Jim remembers, "Downtown it was just a wave of white. The sailors liked to hang out and pick up the girls at the bars, but there were FAR too many sailors, and they were out to have a good time." Another long-time Oklahoma City resident noted that "In the mid-1950s, you had sailors coming in from Norman, Tinker had people, and also weekenders from Fort Sill during the Korean War." Apparently, same-sex contact was sufficient enough to warrant the military police to patrol the downtown area "constantly."²²

Although picking up servicemen downtown was an overt example of "public privacy," some gay and bisexual men sought anonymous sex in other, semi-public locations. A "tearoom" circuit developed along the older beautiful hotels downtown, where men satisfied their passions safely and quickly.²³ The Lee-Huckins Hotel was the

11/25/1942, 18; "Law Divorcing Beer, Dancing Now in Effect," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/30/1943, 1.

²¹ Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005; GJP, interview by author, 3/18/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Linda Cole, interview by author, 7/11/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/26/2005; Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005. All of these establishments were listed as gay or gay-friendly in their interviews.

²² GJP, interview by author, 3/19/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

²³ A tearoom, or "toilet room," was a public restroom of moderate size, usually with booths but not always, where men with a variety of sexual preferences and appetites congregated for anonymous sex. A tearoom gained its reputation based upon its level of safety and availability of willing men, and that reputation spread by word of mouth throughout the gay and bisexual community. For a thorough discussion of tearoom

finest hotel in Oklahoma City when constructed in 1909. It was the second incarnation of the hotel, as a devastating fire destroyed its predecessor the previous year. The Huckins boasted of a massive lobby, marble walls, separate resting parlors for men and women, and an exquisite ballroom that was a popular spot for weddings and dances.²⁴ The Huckins main restroom, located in the basement, was also rather opulent, featuring marble stall dividers and restroom attendants. By the 1940s, the demand for high-end hotels had waned somewhat, so it is possible that the management ignored the high volume of men frequenting their main restroom, which was one of the busiest downtown tearooms. Some enterprising person cut “glory holes” into the marble stall dividers, no small feat in the 1940s, and the tearoom was “going full blast” according to one frequent visitor.²⁵

Another popular tearoom was located at the Biltmore Hotel, a grand structure built in the early 1930s as part of the great skyscraper race in Oklahoma City. Although Oklahoma City and the nation were in the grips of the Great Depression by the early 1930s, banking and oil interests invested millions into the downtown area, building the

aesthetics, see Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (Hawthorne, New York: Aldine de Gruyter Press, 1975).

²⁴ Terry L. Griffith, *Oklahoma City: Statehood to 1930* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2000), 34-35.

²⁵ Quote from Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005. A glory hole is an opening made between stall dividers in a restroom through which men performed fellatio or other sex acts on one other. The Huckins’ tearoom was still popular by the late 1960s, as police kept it under surveillance and arrested residents for lewd and lascivious behavior from time to time. In one of the more high-profile examples, a prominent local Presbyterian minister was arrested there in 1967, according to the *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/30/1967.

Ramsey Tower, the First National Building, and the Biltmore Hotel all in record time.²⁶

The twenty-six story Biltmore rivaled the Skirvin in opulence and surpassed it in size.

The exact size of the Biltmore was unknown, a product of its staggered design, but estimates placed the total square footage at over 285,000. In addition to amenities like a ten-story garage for guest parking, the Biltmore had a huge downstairs restroom that residents likened to a locker room at the YMCA for its notoriety and sexual offerings.

Being arrested at the Biltmore tearoom was almost like a rite of passage in the Oklahoma City gay community, and involved some of the most respected members of the community from time to time. As at the Huckins, when not cruising the Biltmore tearoom, gay and bisexual residents checked into the massive hotel and entertained on a more extensive scale. Jim Fortenberry and several friends “rented rooms at the Biltmore and raided downtown like Hoover vacuums.”²⁷

The Biltmore and the Huckins were in transition by the 1950s. Gone were the days when luxury hotels were at a premium, as the Biltmore, the Skirvin, the Huckins, and others had saturated the small market in Oklahoma City. Cheaper, smaller but still

²⁶ Griffith, *Oklahoma City, 1930 to the Millenium*, 23-33; Stewart, *Born Grown*, 234-237. Apparently, people took bets as to which buildings would be finished first. These construction jobs helped many Oklahoma City residents through some of the hardest Depression years and are a testament to the generosity and forward-thinking ability of some residents.

²⁷ Statistics on the Biltmore came from an article in the *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/4/1931, 20; Information on the buildings footage from Griffith, *Oklahoma City: 1930 to the Millenium*, 71; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/17/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005. Being arrested might be an important hallmark in one’s coming out, but it could also be risky for the well connected. An Oklahoma City mayor was arrested there in the late 1950s, according to some interview participants, something that would surely have derailed his political career in Oklahoma.

elegant hotels like the Black, the Hudson, and the Sieber offered stiff competition as well. Lower room rates resulted, which made these places attractive for a late-night rendezvous and rather anonymous and safe given their sheer size. As a result the management could do little to stop the influx of sex bought, sold, and traded within their hotels, even if they wished. The inexpensive rooms, in large supply, made cruising the downtown area in Oklahoma City much easier and safer for gay men, and were a major reason that downtown hotels dominated the city's gay sexual landscape for years to come.

Hotels were not the only buildings in which queer men carved out sexual space. The headquarters of Montgomery Ward, built in 1929 on the corner of Main and Walker,²⁸ had a fourth floor restroom that became a mainstay for downtown tearoom queens for some time. It was so popular that men stood in line to gain entrance. How ironic that it was located just east of the Oklahoma County Court House, the site of numerous sodomy trials since statehood. Oklahoma City Hall provided another dangerous yet popular outlet for sex downtown. "City Hall was a GREAT place with huge (glory) holes---somebody brought a blowtorch up there! I've been there a number of times coming home from work. You sat on the toilet and made your sheet (toilet paper) go up and down and that was the 'O.K.' Somebody would watch the door and snap their fingers and everybody would stop sucking and read their papers," remembers Earnest, a healthcare worker.²⁹

Although perhaps cliché, Oklahoma City's downtown YMCA also provided ample opportunities for a sexual encounter. The YMCA was the oldest social

²⁸ Stewart, *Born Grown*, 231.

²⁹ Earnest, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 3/27/2005.

organization in Oklahoma City history, as residents met and decided upon the outlines of the association on the first evening after the Land Run in 1889. After meeting in several downtown office buildings, a fundraising campaign in 1917 led to the construction of the first YMCA building on 2nd Street between Broadway and Robinson. The organization sponsored baseball, swimming, and camp activities for city residents and became so popular that construction of a larger building, located at Northwest 5th and Robinson, began in 1952.³⁰ Because the YMCA was essentially a private male club, and racially segregated, it became a popular place for white gay men to go, socialize, and have sex. Rex Ball remembers that “the YMCA was very active, but some people I knew made fun of me for being there so I never went back...Oklahoma City’s YMCA was just like the popular song says! Many of the straights seemed to know what was going on with the gays so you might get ridiculed if observed.”³¹

Perhaps sensitive to the stereotype, however, the Oklahoma City YMCA attempted to curtail same-sex activity. In 1957, YMCA officials asked the police to investigate suspicious activity in the room of Robert Adolph Rose, a 34-year-old newspaper vendor. According to police reports, Rose frequently held “all-male sex parties” and enjoyed “large numbers of young boys making frequent visits” to his room. When arrested, Rose was entertaining six teenaged boys in his room, all of whom went downtown for questioning, and police confiscated a large stash of pornographic materials. Police expected to call other young men in for investigation.³² How the case

³⁰ Stewart, *Born Grown*, 84-86. A branch was constructed on the east side of Oklahoma City for black residents.

³¹ Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005, and 3/9/2005 email follow-up.

played out is unknown, but it shows that same-sex activity occurred at the YMCA, and that it was noticeable enough to warrant a police investigation.

One of the safest and busiest spots for anonymous sex was the men's restroom at the old Union Station depot located at 300 West 7th Street. Built in the late 1920s when Oklahoma City relocated the Frisco and Rock Island Railroad tracks south during another wave of downtown construction, Union Station was an imposing Spanish-colonial style structure replete with chandeliers hanging from its 5000-square-foot waiting room. When automobiles and buses surpassed trains for basic transportation, the need for Union Station declined, and by the early 1950s most of the passenger traffic was absent, although the depot remained partially open.³³ The key spot for cruising here was the huge restroom, situated so that it was lower than the outside walkways. It had rows of stalls, some with glory holes, and huge windows. Whenever authorities policed it, patrons simply stepped outside and drove away. The relative seclusion of the Union Station and its accommodating restroom layout made it one of the easiest and most notorious places for anonymous sex and provided gay and bisexual men with a centrally located place where they could meet and socialize.³⁴

³² "City Man Jailed In Morals Probe," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/9/1957, 2. Although the "victims" in the story were referred to as teenagers, this does not necessarily mean they were minors. Exaggeration for effect is possible, and any young man might be considered a teenager to a hardened vice detective. In fact, in this author's research experience, many of the "victims" mentioned in newspaper accounts or prosecution summaries in Oklahoma County were actually over eighteen.

³³ On Union Station, see Terry L. Griffith, *Oklahoma City: Statehood to 1930* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishers, 2000), 121; Blackburn, *Heart of the Promised Land*, 187; Stewart, *Born Grown*, 148-149.

³⁴ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 8/13/2005; A number of interview respondents indicated that Union Station was a

The popularity of these sources of public sex likely resulted from numerous advantages that tearoom sex offered. As sociologist Laud Humphrey illustrated in his work on gay public sexuality, the restroom offered a public location for sex with enough danger and anonymity to appeal to the rebel in any willing participant, but it was also somewhat safe and easily disguised should anybody enter unexpectedly. In fact, during the “hunting season” -- common parlance for the period between April and October with more accommodating weather -- sex in public restrooms was the most popular and often-used source for sexual gratification outside of personal bedrooms according to Humphreys. More importantly, tearooms provided uninitiated gay and bisexual men with a recognizable, safe spot in which they might become acclimated to the homosexual landscape. For married gay or bisexual men, being outside the home or workplace provided valuable discretion as well.³⁵

Humphrey’s findings are consistent with the rationales offered by Oklahoma City men as to the popularity of tearoom sex. Several respondents indicated that, since they were married, tearooms offered some of the most convenient – if not the only – sources of sex with other men. The fact that tearooms opened in dangerous places in Oklahoma City, such as at City Hall, added a degree of danger that made for “GREAT sex,” according to Earnest. In addition, word got around about where the best places were to

cruising favorite, or at least they heard it was “cruisy.” The station closed for good in the 1970s and was later remodeled by a local business enterprise for office space.

³⁵ Laud Humphreys, *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (Chicago: Aldine Press, 1975), 1-5. Humphrey’s work is essential reading for those seeking to understand the sociological and psychological basis for gay public sex. It was controversial, however, in that Humphreys interjected himself into the study by serving as a participant in some encounters as both a lookout and voyeur.

have sex, which helped those just coming to terms with their sexuality find opportunities for sex.³⁶

Downtown Oklahoma City theaters also saw plenty of same-sex action, despite the fact that they offered less privacy than tearooms. Like many other cities in the United States after 1920, Oklahoma City found an expanding market for theaters, both stage and cinema, driven by local residents with disposable income. Even during the heady days of the Great Depression, many city residents managed to scrape together enough money to attend the occasional movie, and if nothing else it provided a momentary escape from the doldrums of economic hardship. Two of the more popular theaters downtown were the Criterion and the Orpheum. Located on Main Street between Robinson and Broadway, the Criterion was constructed in 1921 at a cost over \$750,000. The interior was awash with walnut paneling, artwork, and velvet finery. The Criterion boasted of luxurious restrooms, a nursery for young children, a tea room, a shoe emporium, a cigar shop, and other small businesses that catered to discriminating theater patrons. State of the art lighting and sound systems were complemented by architectural amenities like mezzanines, balconies, and trinkets like luxurious drapes and heavy overstuffed furniture. Residents and guests alike considered the Criterion one of the finest theaters in the Southwest. The Orpheum was a remodeled incarnation of the old Overholser Opera House, located at 213 West Grand, Oklahoma City's first true venue for cultural entertainments that appealed to middle- and upper-class residents. It also opened in 1921 and although less opulent than the Criterion, it provided theater

³⁶ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; GJP, interview by author, 3/18/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/26/2005; Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005.

patrons with a fine venue to view stage or screen productions. In 1930, the Orpheum closed for renovations and reopened as the Warner Theater, complete with its own Rockette-style chorus line modeled after the Roxy in New York City, and a master of ceremonies who introduced acts and movies.³⁷

While the Criterion and the Warner might be considered “super theaters,” several other theaters that catered to smaller audiences opened at about the same time. The Rialto opened in 1921 and promised nothing but first-run movies for the 500 or so patrons who enjoyed its overstuffed leather seats. Located at 131 West Grand up the block from the Warner, the Rialto was another popular cruising spot for gay men.³⁸ Other theaters frequently mentioned for anonymous sex were the Center, opened in 1945 on Couch Drive, the Midwest, the Uptown, and the Midway.³⁹ Virtually all of the downtown theaters provided opportunities for clandestine same-sex sexual encounters according to those interviewed. Most of the larger theaters were several decades old by the 1950s, constructed in a heavy old-fashioned style that included balconies and dim lighting, and remained inexpensive, especially during the daylight hours when the lack of large crowds only made them more attractive for such action.

Bookstores in Oklahoma City also served as very public arenas where gay and bisexual men might solicit sexual partners. The possibilities varied. Circumspect men

³⁷ W.F. Kerr, *The Story of Oklahoma City* (Chicago: S.J. Clarke and Company, 1922) v. 2, 516; *Daily Oklahoman* 4/21/1921; *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/21/1930; Blackburn, *Heart of the Promised Land*, 150.

³⁸ GJP, follow-up telephone conversation, 7/15/2005. See *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/10/1921, 46, for an article dealing with the Rialto’s opening.

³⁹ GJP, interview by author, 3/19/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 7/3/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005.

might thumb through magazines or lurk about in the sports section waiting for another interested partner, always looking for sustained eye contact or “crotch-cruising.”⁴⁰ Aggressive queer men might approach other men and make an overt offer to engage in sex. “They had the bookstores, of course, going full blast...there were 12 that I know of,” recalled long-time resident Jim.⁴¹ One popular pickup place was a bookstore in the Sieber Hotel, located at Northwest 12th and Hudson. Built in 1928, the Sieber Hotel was the first apartment hotel constructed in Oklahoma City, and true to the era, a number of small shops or businesses were located in its lobby.⁴² That bookstore was “run by a rather ancient gay man,” Rex remembers. The literature available for gay men in the late 1940s was limited, but the very act of perusing certain books or magazines made it clear for what one was searching, and it was easy to get picked up.

Then, the earliest observations were from muscle magazines---Western Photography Guild and AMC---which were disguised to some extent. Starting at age sixteen when I could drive, there was a bookstore at the Sieber Hotel. My first overtly gay experience was with (the manager). He took me next door after seeing me look at a muscle magazine. It was not a good experience---he was aggressive to me, and I was pretty distant, but I had an orgasm. He asked me to reciprocate but I told him no, and he began to sob and talk about how cruel I was. This was a man close to 70---my age now---and I decided that this was not how I wanted to end up: on my knees in front of some sixteen year-old kid crying.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Crotch-cruising” refers to the practice of gay men making eye contact with other men they are attracted to, immediately looking down at that person’s groin, and then returning their gaze to the person’s eyes. It served as both a sign of interest by the cruiser and a safe, convenient way to ascertain the cruisee’s interest.

⁴¹ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/17/2005.

⁴² Terry L. Griffith, *Oklahoma City: Statehood to 1930* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Press, 2000), 126.

⁴³ Rex Ball, interview by author, Tulsa, 1/14/2005.

Apparently, downtown bookstores, theaters, and tearooms were notorious enough to elicit attention from police. Responding to what was described as “disgraceful sex perversion” at a number of downtown spots, the Oklahoma City police vice squad ran a week-long undercover surveillance campaign in November of 1952. Over that week detectives watched five theaters, a drug store, a bookstore, several restrooms, as well as public transportation depots looking for homosexual sex perverts. Police came away disappointed with the results, as they made only two arrests, both of young men who propositioned undercover officers in downtown theaters.⁴⁴

Although the *Daily Oklahoman* related that a single letter from a concerned citizen initiated this investigation, the issue was likely more widespread. The police were watching downtown restrooms, bookstores, theaters, and transportation depots – all of which were rather popular sources for same-sex sexual activities according to interview respondents cited earlier. Authorities managed only two arrests, both in theaters, and they labeled the charges “mostly rumor” and the whole raid “disappointing.”⁴⁵ This might indicate that gay and bisexual men were less active, or at least more invisible in Oklahoma City, than other sources claim. However, a number of other possibilities might also explain the dearth in arrests. Since the operation occurred in November, around election time, perhaps the lack of arrests indicate that gay and bisexual men were more careful at that time. Authorities seemed to police the bars and cruise spots during election season, the holidays, and during good weather, and members

⁴⁴ “Police Discount Perversion Report,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/12/1952, 46.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual world knew this.⁴⁶ The number of arrests made in such a sting would also hinge on just how “undercover” police officers went. If they were not successfully posing as gay men, or at least men open to the idea of sex with other men, the solicitations from their intended targets would not be forthcoming. Interview participants Ralph Prevette, Jim Fortenberry, and Rex Ball all noted how easy it was to spot an undercover officer most of the time.⁴⁷ The level of the officers’ undercover skills is impossible to ascertain, as is their commitment to the task at hand. Although police officials labeled the charges as “mostly rumor,” the fact that so many of the most common sources of gay sex in Oklahoma City were targeted – theaters, bookstores, restrooms, and transportation depots -- implies that gay and bisexual men were visible to the community at large, to some degree.

Tearooms, theaters, and bookstores provided Oklahoma City gay and bisexual men with ample opportunities for sexual gratification, but they were neither the only, nor the most public outlet, for such behavior. In fact, prostitution was easily one of the most common and public sources of gay male sexuality after World War II in Oklahoma City, a fact that remained true well into the 1970s.⁴⁸ Although often considered a female exploit, prostitution was a rather popular diversion for young men in Oklahoma City, and

⁴⁶ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; GJP, interview by author, 3/18/2005. The most extensive surveillance and arrest of gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City occurred on Thanksgiving weekend in 1957. For details, see the *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/26/1957, 30.

⁴⁷ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005.

⁴⁸ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005; Ginger Lamarr, interview by author, 9/10/2004; Earnest, interview by author, 3/26/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

these hustlers worked the streets for a variety of reasons. Some wanted to be free from the constraints of a regular job, others wanted to make money quickly or have something to do, and still others found the lure of anonymous sex too good to pass up. That they were paid for it only made the decision easier:

Well, I was married and in the middle of a divorce. I ended up, with all of my debts (alimony, child support), I got \$5 every two weeks. They (Navy) had to give you that for shaving gear, toothpaste, etc. So, you know where I went---right to the streets, on Grand Avenue. That's where I started. It wasn't exactly the money, for me it was a way to have a place to spend the weekend and have some enjoyment away from the base. It was all I could do, really. I could hit the streets and in five minutes I was gone.⁴⁹

Another respondent who hustled, Jim, was attracted to the lifestyle for the money it provided and the excitement associated with raw sexuality. He remembers how quickly men picked one another up in downtown Oklahoma City in the 1950s:

That would have been when I was 14 or 15, and then again when I was 18. I liked the underground world, I liked the excitement and energy flow I received from this "no-no" deal. It started downtown one night walking home. An unattractive man pulled up and asked if I wanted to get into the car, and I said I didn't know, and he asked how much did I charge. I felt an adrenaline gush, and told him to keep laying money out on the (car) console, and he did. It was the most exciting thing I have ever done. People told you what they wanted and you named the price.⁵⁰

Whatever the motivation, a man could find plenty of willing partners downtown along Grand Avenue, all the way from Broadway to Pennsylvania. As the center of Oklahoma City's business and social life at the turn-of-the-century, Grand quickly became the center of a sexual environment in which men satisfied alternative desires just

⁴⁹ Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005.

⁵⁰ Jim McMurray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/20/2005.

as quickly and often as the mainstream. Race was also not an issue for downtown street cruisers as it might have been in the segregated restaurant and hotel facilities located elsewhere. “There was a subculture of black gays, who had no place to go, so they worked the streets downtown too,” recalled Jim, a connoisseur of downtown anonymous sex.⁵¹ Those with the means or inclination to be out could be so in Oklahoma City with a vengeance in the 1940s and 1950s, and the military presence only made it easier:

A lot of “girls” rode around downtown singing, quite openly out of the back of convertibles: “We are the girls of the green star chorus, normal boys simply bore us, we don’t go on our vacations, we suck **** at the naval station.” They had this gorgeous convertible and they rode around downtown singing this. It wasn’t boring...Between Lawton (Fort Sill) and Norman (Naval base), a lot of those boys came to town and were picked up.⁵²

Although common, downtown sexual activity between male prostitutes and other men rarely attracted notice from police or religious authorities, if the almost complete lack of evidence regarding arrests for prostitution is any indication. This might seem surprising, given the prevalence of the practice according to interview participants, but several factors made it unlikely that a hustler would ever be arrested for prostitution in the 1940s and 1950s in Oklahoma City. First, there was nothing unusual, or at least overtly sexual, read into a situation where one man got into an automobile with another. Conversely, an unattached female engaging in exactly the same behavior would be much more suspicious, especially if she had prior arrests or no gainful employment. Second, when authorities caught two men in a compromising sexual position, prosecutors likely preferred more serious charges against them, such as felony sodomy violations in state court, instead of a misdemeanor charge of vagrancy by prostitution in city court.

⁵¹ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/15/2005.

⁵² Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005.

Anonymous sex and public sex are common historical constructs in post-World War II gay male subcultures in the United States, but entertainment spots – usually gay bars – gave those subcultures shape and depth. These were public places that offered entertainment and socialization, with varying degrees of flamboyance, but shielded patrons from direct public scrutiny by limiting membership and strictly policing the coming and going of clientele. Oklahoma City had its share of such establishments, ranging from the pseudo-straight Bishop’s Tap Room to the overtly queer Mayflower Lounge, with a range of other establishments that fell somewhere between these two poles. Gay bars were important inculcators of community spirit for Oklahoma City gay and bisexual men, and they operated with a reasonable amount of freedom at a time when this was not true in other larger cities.

Bishop’s Restaurant was a familiar hangout for many people in downtown Oklahoma City. William W. Bishop opened the restaurant, located at 113 North Broadway, by 1923, and it remained in business until at least 1969. Conveniently located across from the Skirvin Hotel, Bishop’s was famous for its Brown Derby Steaks, shrimp cocktail, and walls covered with autographed photos of celebrities. The wood paneled walls and accent lighting gave the downtown establishment a classy touch, and in keeping with that theme all hostesses always wore proper “after-five” attire, and some took modeling lessons and modeled clothes by Harry Katz and Neiman-Marcus.⁵³ The layout was typical for dual-purpose rectangular buildings, with a long counter located at the front, shadowing a large number of booths and tables in the back. Green plants were everywhere. Located at the very back of the restaurant, and running perpendicular to it

⁵³ “Folks Dined at Bishop’s for 43 Years,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 3 March 1999, 65.

so as to form an L-shaped building, was Bishop's Tap Room, which first opened in 1938. The Tap Room boasted of its dark, quiet atmosphere and the "decorative wall sketches by Damberg." Bishop's was also completely air-conditioned, something that probably set it apart from other establishments in downtown Oklahoma City at the time.⁵⁴

In the 1940s and until the late 1950s, Bishop's Tap Room was Oklahoma City's premier nightspot for gay and lesbian residents. Most bars in Oklahoma City were stuck with a 12:00 AM curfew as per a city ordinance.⁵⁵ Bishop's Restaurant stayed open well into the morning, however, so people filtered back in from the Taproom for an early breakfast after a night of revelry. The restaurant served as a staging ground for people to regroup before leaving for home or private gatherings. One popular gadabout relates, "Bishop's was PACKED, (especially) on the weekends. There were a few straights there, but it was packed with gays. I went there seven nights a week, so I know it was there."⁵⁶ One young Oklahoma man visited Bishop's before he was old enough to do so legally:

"Oh, it was wonderful, wonderful. The best salad ever! It was a restaurant, and behind it was the Tap Room. Gay guys went in later (in the day). One time our band came to the State Fair for a competition, and we passed right by it. Later that evening, me and some friends snuck out of the hotel and went in. It was full of "older" gay men---at least older to me at the time since I was just a senior in high school. One of the men just picked me up and placed me on the bar, saying

⁵⁴ Apparently, the Tap Room was considered a separate business by city authorities, given it had a separate address of 110 W 1st. "Bishop's Announces its New Tap Room," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/13/1938, 11.

⁵⁵ This was a condition of the Beer Ban Bill passed in the Oklahoma legislature in 1942 in an effort to prevent the spread of VD among soldiers at newly-opened Will Rogers Field. The law proscribed the hours a beer hall could be open, prohibited dancing in the establishment unless it was located within a hotel, and held owners and managers accountable if underage and unattached females were allowed to congregate there.

⁵⁶ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

“can we take you home?.” It was a better class of people than what they had during the day (at night).”⁵⁷

The phenomenon of a club or restaurant being “straight” during the day and “queer” at night is not a new one. In lesser-populated regions of the United States, especially after World War II, gay men and women took advantage of any opportunity to socialize in a comfortable environment. Ricardo Brown fondly remembers his days in St Paul, Minnesota, where a well-known restaurant run by a German immigrant couple was only too happy to serve gays after the dinner rush. In many ways this seemed like the perfect relationship for all concerned. Business owners provided services to mixed or straight crowds during the day, free from public harassment, and then catered to gay and lesbian crowds after hours, capitalizing on the legitimacy earned earlier.⁵⁸ This situation likely replicated itself in regard to Bishop’s.

If Bishop’s quickly gained a reputation among homosexuals as a location in which to congregate, it also did so among the community at large, and a few people complained. Police visited Bishop’s from time to time to disperse rowdy patrons or clean up after a fight.⁵⁹ In 1947, authorities raided Bishop’s as part of a larger liquor sweep of downtown bars, restaurants, and clubs. The police arrested sixteen people and

⁵⁷ Gil Ray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/20/2005.

⁵⁸ Ricardo J. Brown, *The Evening Crowd at Kirkser’s: A Gay Life in the 1940s*. ed. William Reichard (University of Minnesota Press, 2001). This pattern also occurred in larger cities. See Brett Beemyn, “A Queer Capital: Race, Class, Gender, and the Changing Social Landscape of Washington’s Gay Communities, 1940-1955,” in *Creating A Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997), 185.

⁵⁹ “Two Are Injured In Tap Room Fight,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/3/1947, 25; “Man Charged After Setto With Police,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/7/1948, 22.

took them to headquarters during what vice Lieutenant Charles Scott described as “cleaning out some spots.”⁶⁰ Another raid in 1951, again part of a weekend-long foray into the Oklahoma City nightlife by police, led to the arrest of forty-six people, sixteen of whom were detained for a more intensive investigation. Most of those arrested were residents of Oklahoma City, although a few listed Norman and Tulsa as home. Lieutenant Scott stated that “We have had scores of complaints contending that sex perverts are permitted to congregate” at the bar.⁶¹

These raids proved disappointing for authorities, however, as Police Judge Mike Foster dismissed the charges against twelve of the sixteen men arrested during the 1947 raid. According to Foster, officers “failed to make cases” against the men and offered no testimony that supported the charges of disorderly conduct. As has been demonstrated, Bishop’s was a relatively well-known point of socialization for Oklahoma City gay and bisexual men. The fact that most of the arrests were for disorderly conduct, and that authorities held up to one-third of those arrested for investigation, suggests that many of those arrested were queer men.⁶² This was a common practice whenever the police arrested “sex perverts” in other cities across the United States, as the police wanted to make sure that those suspected of being gay did not have outstanding warrants or prior felonies that merited state charges. Otherwise, straight residents or passing gay and bisexual residents were merely fined and released. The very act of investigating gay and

⁶⁰ “Police Grab 78 In City Tavern Clean-up Drive,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/27/1947, 22; “Weekend Raids Bring \$1,360,” *Daily Oklahoman* 10/28/1947, 2.

⁶¹ “City Vice Raid Nets 46 Persons,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/12/1951, 35.

⁶² “Police Grab 78 In City Tavern Clean-up Drive,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/27/1947, 22; “Weekend Raids Bring \$1,360,” *Daily Oklahoman* 10/28/1947, 2.

bisexual men, something that obviously-straight men did not experience, was harassment aimed at their subculture.⁶³

Bishop's Tap Room was a well-known gay hub after dark, and apparently the police knew of this since at least the mid-1940s. That these two raids were the only ones significant enough to be mentioned in the *Daily Oklahoman*, and that they occurred only in conjunction with a larger raiding sweep of downtown Oklahoma City drinking establishments, might suggest that the level of public, obvious homosexuality did not exist on such a level as to merit concern. This seems unlikely given the first-hand accounts of Bishop's popularity with gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents, as well as Lieutenant Scott's reference to the "scores" of complaints his department received about homosexuals congregating there. The dearth of "gay" raids on Bishop's might simply mean that gay and bisexual men cleverly avoided detection. Bishop's cultivated a reputation for being an upscale tavern, at least during the day, and perhaps gay and bisexual men benefited from that if officers randomly appeared for occasional identity checks or surveillance. In any case, Bishop's Tap Room served as a powerful source of identity-formation and support for gay and bisexual men interviewed for this study.⁶⁴

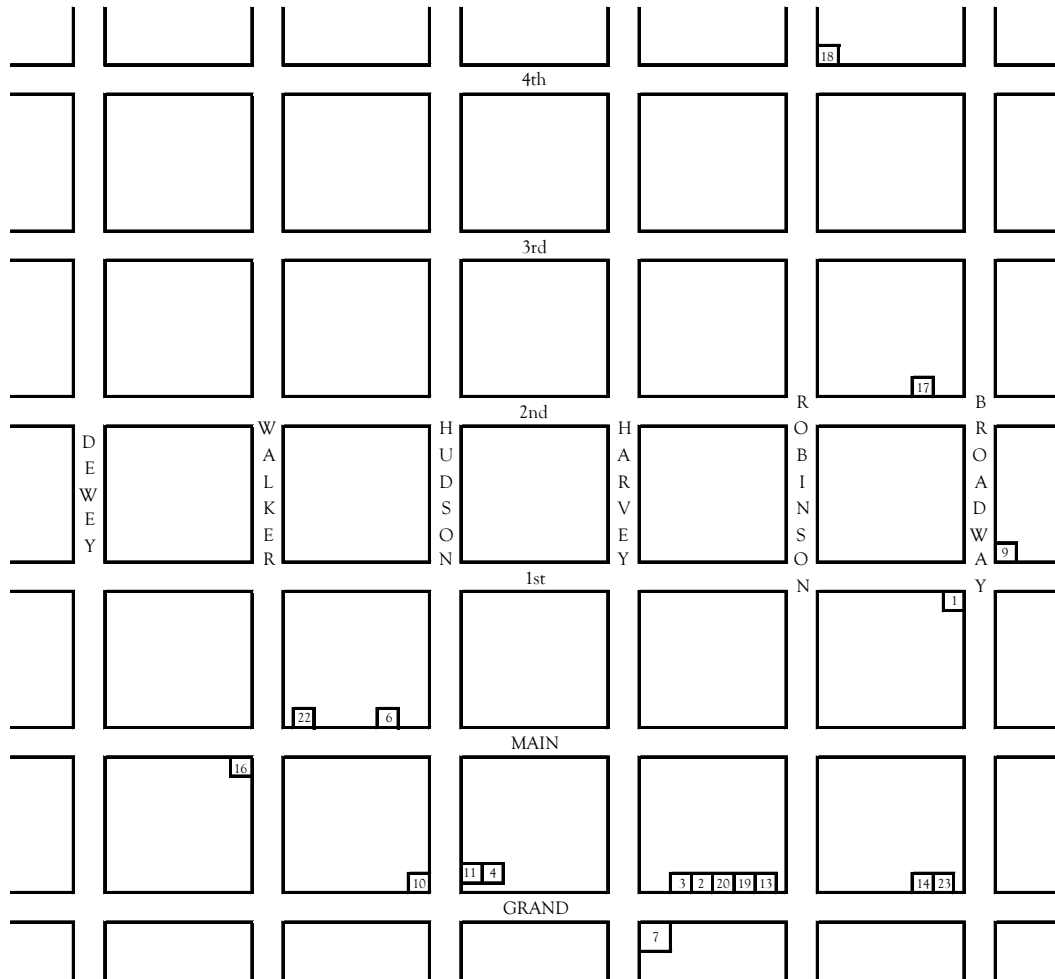
One of the first bars other than Bishop's to gain a loyal following among downtown cruisers was the Circus Room, a rather plain-looking beer bar. Located at 221 West Grand Avenue across from the Biltmore Hotel, the Circus was "flamboyantly gay,

⁶³ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 171-172; Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love*, 50; Beemyn, "A Queer Capital," 212-213

⁶⁴ Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005; GJP, interview by author, 3/18/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Linda Cole, interview by author, 6/29/2005; J.L.Asher, interview by author, 9/10/2004.

Figure Three

Popular Sources for LGBT Sex and Socialization, 1941-1970



- 1 – Bishop’s Tap Room
- 2 – Circus Room, Ruby’s (1950s), Manhattan (1960s)
- 3 – Blue Lounge, Sweet Leona’s
- 4 – Mirror Lounge (basement of Hudson Hotel)
- 5 – Talk-of-the-Town
- 6 – Club Burgundy
- 7 – Biltmore Hotel
- 8 – Huckins Hotel
- 9 – Skirvin Hotel
- 10 – Black Hotel
- 11 – Hudson Hotel
- 12 – Criterion Theater

- 13 – Orpheum and Warner Theater
- 14 – Rialto Theater
- 15 – Midway Theater
- 16 – Montgomery Ward’s
- 17 – YMCA (1st location)
- 18 – YMCA (2nd location)
- 19 – Beverly’s Chicken House
- 20 – Tiger Lounge
- 22 – Union Bus Station
- 23 – It’ll Do Club

on the inside, but when you hit the street you had to ‘butch it up’.”⁶⁵ Red Holder owned the Circus, which first opened in about 1952. Red knew the value of running a tight ship and he encouraged patrons and employees alike to steer clear of controversy. He gave bartenders a bottle of whiskey and \$20 to deliver to a minister waiting in the alley behind the club every Saturday, apparently to keep the local religious authorities at bay. The bar also gained a reputation for being very cliquish. When the John A. Brown department store located downtown, some of the more “elegant” employees frequented the Circus Room, much to the chagrin of the regular, working-class customers. Derisively referred to as “elevator boys,” these high-bred boys were told that they could hang out with the regulars when they could “suck better dick.”⁶⁶

The Circus Room also hosted the occasional local female impersonation show, a rare event in queer bars in the 1950s in Oklahoma City. While the Jewel Box Revue and other national performers came through town and found large audiences, local talent performed in only a few venues, and most were limited to special events or holidays like Halloween. Gil Ray, then fresh out of high school in 1954, attended a Halloween ball at the Circus Room. It was his first ever performance and it motivated him to develop his talent. “I never thought about the money,” Gil states, “I got a little attention, and I wasn’t tied up (committed), so just get up and go! It was something special.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ GJP, interview by author, 3/19/2005. “Butch it up” referred to acting masculine, or at least not overtly gay, in public.

⁶⁶ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

A fact of life for many bars in Oklahoma City, whether they courted a gay or straight clientele, was that they were probably not open very long. The costs associated with running a bar were tremendous. People usually just bought the right to do business in an establishment, not the building itself, which meant lease terminations and increased rental costs could occur at any time. Fines for serving alcohol to underage patrons, for allowing the house to become “disorderly,” and for having illegal liquor in the bar -- even if a patron brought it in -- could cripple a business. Payoffs to local authorities could also make turning a profit almost impossible. Despite the turnover in bar ownership, once a bar was known and recognized as a gay bar by the community, that location usually stayed queer. The Circus stayed open until sometime in early 1956, when it became Ruby’s Lounge, owned by a straight couple. It lasted only a short time before becoming the Manhattan in 1959. Owned by Park Bingham, the Manhattan employed a Mexican bartender with a sharp tongue affectionately known as Tijuana Mamma. Because rental rooms were attached to it, patrons could dance at the Manhattan, which made it very popular with gay crowds. In all of its incarnations -- the Circus, Ruby’s, and the Manhattan -- it remained a gay bar by and large.⁶⁸

This phenomenon presented itself once again in regard to the Blue Lounge and the Mirror Lounge, both run by Robert M. Hargrove. Open since the 1940s, the Blue Lounge was rather non-descript, located next door to the Circus Room at 231 West Grand. A few blocks up the street sat the Mirror Lounge, located at 14 North Hudson in the basement of the Hudson Hotel, and across from the Black Hotel, both of which

⁶⁸ Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005; Linda Cole, interview by author, 7/11/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 8/9/2005.

offered inexpensive rooms. This location, near the downtown cruising paradise of Grand Avenue and at the terminal for the interurban streetcars, made the Mirror Lounge very popular with gay and bisexual men. “It was busy, busy, busy” remembers Jim Fortenberry in regard to the availability of a sexual encounter.⁶⁹ Hargrove sold both the Mirror and the Blue in 1957, likely due to problems associated with licensure. Leona Pierce purchased the former Blue Lounge and rechristened it Sweet Leona’s. An average beer bar, Sweet Leona’s was a place that was very “gay friendly” but would never become a self-identified gay establishment. Some residents remember it as more of a trade haven---a place to pick up straight or curious men for a non-reciprocated sex act. Sweet Leona’s became a popular spot for downtown cruisers and businessmen at lunch, and the crowd was usually 40% gay, 60% straight all day long, according to patrons, unlike Bishop’s which went gay after dark.⁷⁰ Leona’s was a key portal into the downtown world of gay and bisexual men, however, since the mixed crowd gave people a safe environment in which to explore their sexuality. “The guys that didn’t self-identify as gay went there. It was the kind of place a “straight” guy could go, have a beer, and hook up with a queen. It was a convenient place.”⁷¹ The Mirror Lounge traded hands several times before ending up with Leona Pierce as well.⁷² Ginger Lamar

⁶⁹ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

⁷⁰ Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Ginger Lamar, interview by author, 9/10/2004; Earnest, interview by author, 3/26/2005.

⁷¹ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 2/19/2005

⁷² The bar was incorporated as Club Mirror Lounge by G.C. Pierce, Leona Pierce, and W.B.Lowery on 5/3/1962 and remained open until at least 1981.

remembers her first trip to Sweet Leona's and the Mirror Lounge as part of her introduction to the Oklahoma City gay community:

There was the Mirror Lounge, located in the Hudson Hotel, and it was a bisexual club. You had everything from hookers in there, and you could pick up a guy. There was a club---Sweet Leona's---that looked like a straight club, but if you sat there long enough you could get picked up. I had a friend that took me down there to see it. Leona was a big, large busted brassy blond---a cheesy Dolly Parton type. And loud! Everybody came there to see her. The first time I went in there were a lot of men and couples. My friend said that if we sat there long enough, something would come along. It was just a mixture of people---gay and straight---and the straights didn't care.⁷³

Gay patrons were admonished against acting too nelly in either establishment, which suggests that management feared being identified as a gay bar. "The ownership did not want any gays, but the waitresses knew they were going to get good tips, so if you got a little 'out of bunch' they would say 'shut up, I'm losing my crowd'."⁷⁴

The presence and popularity of these so-called bisexual bars might indicate that the gay male subculture in the 1950s was more closeted than was actually the case. Although the Circus Room opened as a queer bar from the beginning, it did not last long enough to make a significant mark in the historical legend of Oklahoma City's gay male world. Sweet Leona's, the Blue Lounge, and the Mirror Lounge were places where gay, bisexual, and straight residents congregated -- sometimes in a very rowdy way -- yet none of the establishments ever became conspicuously gay. This does not diminish their significance in the process of community building for gay men in Oklahoma City, however. Gay and bisexual men shared these spaces with straights, and they each used

⁷³ Ginger Lamarr, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 9/10/2004.

⁷⁴ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005. "Out of bunch" referred to gay patrons getting loud and or campy inside the bar.

the space for different things. Straight men likely failed to realize that gay and bisexual men sat at tables next to them, but that truly speaks to their importance. Gay men fought to project and sustain their own public presence in these so-called bisexual bars, taking advantage of the legitimacy offered by the large number of straight patrons to maintain a safe, known queer presence downtown. Gay men did not shrink away from places like this, but they carefully negotiated their way into situations where they could use public space for their own needs, and on their own terms. The popularity of bisexual bars for gay and bisexual men illustrates two very important things: first, that the means and availability for gay socialization extended into the straight arena more than previously assumed; second, that the sexual landscape downtown was more complex and varied than implied by the caricature of Oklahoma City as a bastion of intolerance and religious conservatism.⁷⁵

While bisexual bars were very popular with queer men in Oklahoma City, residents did have at least one gay-owned and operated establishment in the 1950s, and it was one of the most enduring. The Mayflower Lounge was never what one might call ritzy, but it quickly gained a reputation as being Oklahoma City's most popular gay bar.⁷⁶ Located at the northeast corner of Northwest 23rd and Classen, the Mayflower Lounge

⁷⁵ George Chauncey talks about the concept of "shared spaces" between gay and straight New York residents in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), chapter five.

⁷⁶ Every participant interviewed for this project either spent a great deal of time at the Mayflower or went to it exclusively when they went to a bar. That location, 1133 NW 23rd was home to a variety of bars and grills through the years. It was even called the Mayflower Lounge in 1952 when Don and Ollie Stobaugh owned it. By all accounts, only when Pritchard and Mitchell opened their incarnation of the Mayflower Lounge in 1957 was it gay.

opened in the late 1940s as the Mayflower Grill in a dingy building once used as a real estate office. According to one frequent visitor, the Grill instantly became a popular place for gays and lesbians, but did not emerge as a gay bar until the late 1950s.⁷⁷ In 1958, Bill Mitchell and Roger Pritchard, two of the most colorful business owners in the history of Oklahoma City, purchased the Mayflower and transformed it into a gay bar, one designed to cater to both lesbians and gay men. Mitchell was Oklahoma City's premier gay bootlegger, known for his James Dean looks, his fiery temper, and his ability to conceive of and start successful businesses.⁷⁸ Roger Pritchard was also a shrewd businessman, and the more polished of the two. The two mercurial men shared a turbulent personal relationship, one that spilled over into their professional relationship. They started a number of bars in short succession, made them successful, and then sold them just as they started to thrive in an effort to salvage their rocky relationship.⁷⁹ More than one person remarked that a party never seemed to rock unless Bill and Roger tried to kill each other, and humor gave way to reality in 1965 when Roger shot Bill in the face

⁷⁷ GJP, follow-up interview, Oklahoma City, 7/15/2005.

⁷⁸ "Bandit is Shot by Bootleggers." *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/31/1954, page 1. As a function of being a "dry" state, bootleggers found a built-in business with incredible supply and demand. Oklahoma City authorities tried in vain to police the sale of illegal liquor, frequently arresting drivers and shutting down supply lines, only to see them reappear instantly. The level of corruption was high, and the Oklahoma City police were notoriously ineffective.

⁷⁹ The pair owned the Mayflower, the Inferno, the Beer House, the Jungle Pit, and others.

after an argument.⁸⁰ By sheer force of personality, Bill and Roger made any new venture they pursued the talk of Oklahoma City.

The Mayflower opened as a beer bar from the beginning, which meant that the clientele would be primarily working-class, that dancing was prohibited, and the décor was rather simple. When visitors entered, they ran right into the seating area, which gave the bar an old-world saloon feel. Located up about six stairs or so in the back was the bar. A leaky roof heavily damaged the ceiling by the time Mitchell and Pritchard rented the building, and at first the wall board would crumble and fall into patrons' glasses. Soon after, somebody donated an old military parachute, and the management tacked it up in the bar to prevent more fallout. One can imagine how dark the Mayflower must have been, but it had a certain charm. A local artist named Billy Dawson painted a large mural on one wall, framed in gold, that featured a reclining fat woman beckoning patrons to "feed me a grape, baby!"⁸¹

Part of the attraction for gay men to the Mayflower may well have been the presence of large numbers of young men at the coffeehouse located upstairs. Local ordinance required that all taverns and clubs not located inside a hotel or rooming house close by midnight, and the Mayflower could not take advantage of that loophole. Always forward-thinking, Bill and Roger catered to the large contingent of revelers that hoped to continue socializing by adding a small restaurant to the club. The two lived in

⁸⁰ Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005; Linda Cole, interview by author, 6/29/2005; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 6/29/2005; "Gunfire Ends Pair's Dispute," *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/22/1965, 3.

⁸¹ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Linda Cole, telephone interview, 7/11/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005.

a loft located above the Mayflower for a time, but moved out and converted the living quarters into a small breakfast nook called the CoffeeHouse. Liquor was not served at the CoffeeHouse, so anybody could go, including the underage or “chicken.” At about midnight, when the Mayflower closed as per local ordinance, all of the Mayflower patrons went upstairs to check on the availability of unattached young men.⁸² The CoffeeHouse functioned as a convenient source of sex for late-night cruisers and introduced young gay men into the Oklahoma City homosexual subculture.

Another attraction that brought plenty of business to the Mayflower was the presence of Gil Ray, a petite young farm boy who first sauntered into Oklahoma City in the mid-1950s while on a Future Farmers of America field trip. Gil had been something of an anomaly in the rural Oklahoma town where he grew up, prone to show animals at FFA conventions and plow wheat fields in drag. One long-time acquaintance remembered that “Gil had sweet and forbearing parents. He lived out in western Oklahoma where you went miles without seeing people, and if you did see them, you waved. Gil was out in this big old wheat field, in full drag---pumps, everything---and all of these farmers are driving by staring, while he waves! He was a very fine exotic dancer and great entertainer.”⁸³ Ray, famous for his gymnastic abilities and high kicks, worked as a bartender and barmaid at the Mayflower during the late-1950s. “When I first met Gil, he was working at the Mayflower, wearing high-heeled white pumps and a

⁸² Ibid.; Jim McMurray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/20/2005. When Bill and Roger sold the Mayflower, the new owners renamed the CoffeeHouse the Frantic Attic. “Chicken” was a term used to describe young gay man, barely eighteen but possibly younger.

⁸³ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 2/19/2005.

one piece bathing suit. He kicked his leg so high he got his shoe caught in the parachute over the bar...He was an institution.”⁸⁴ Gil parlayed his gymnastic abilities and personality into a successful career as a female impersonator and a long-time bar owner in Oklahoma City.

Because Oklahoma City had a modest number of queer bars, and a relatively open sexual subculture in the downtown area, it probably was inevitable that gay and bisexual men would experience some level of violence from the general population. Much of the physical violence or intimidation that queer men in Oklahoma City faced came from teenagers.⁸⁵ J.L., an Oklahoma City tailor, remembers being harassed by some young men while leaving the bar. “I was assaulted one evening leaving the Mayflower. Some friends were visiting from Dallas, and we parked out on the side of the theatre. I was just acting silly carrying one of the dykes that was visiting and some straight boys walked up and said, ‘Here’s one,’ and just knocked us down and hit me in the head.” Other patrons were assaulted with baseball bats, ambushed when they returned to their automobiles, or had bricks hurled at them.⁸⁶

The police also harassed gay and bisexual men, but that occurred most often when patrons left gay establishments. For years, the police seemed content to allow gay and bisexual men a modicum of tolerance, so long as their revelry remained inside queer bars,

⁸⁴ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

⁸⁵ The issue of juvenile delinquency and teenage mayhem is discussed more fully in the next chapter.

⁸⁶ J.L. Asher, interview by author, 9/10/2004.

away from the general public.⁸⁷ Officers who were motivated to harass queer residents, however, found plenty of opportunities for such pursuits, and the more flamboyant members of the Oklahoma City gay subculture were easy targets. “Now, the ones they usually went after were the very effeminate ones---the ones who demanded acceptance. I was usually stopped after leaving the (Mayflower), would be questioned, or searched...I was never attacked for the simple fact that I am tall and have always been big... When I was 16, the DA and I had a hell of a lot in common, so he left me alone and my friends alone, but he liked his favors. There were cops that liked their favors too...”⁸⁸

Although the physical intimidation of gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City by teenagers or the police was a very real threat, not all of those targeted retreated from it. Mayflower patrons developed an escort system, whereby those leaving the bar had several friends walk them to their car and stay until they could safely leave the parking lot.⁸⁹ Other gay and bisexual residents were not afraid to respond to the physical violence, which surprised their attackers. It could even come from some of the least-likely of sources – drag queens. As Gil Ray related:

(The Mayflower) was already known to be gay, and so all of the little high school kids tried to run us down all the time. It was a common thing for everyone to have a brick when you went into the bar. They would throw bricks at us, but we would keep ours, and when we went back out we would just plow them. It was teenagers---big-time. One time we had a hairdresser and his name was Hugh---a big boy---but I mean he was always chasing (cruising) these boys. One day they

⁸⁷ GJP, interview by author, 3/18/2005; Linda Cole, telephone interview by author, 6/29/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

⁸⁸ Quote from Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005; GJP, interview by author, 3/18/2005.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

(the boys) got him and tied him up to an electrical (pole) and he was there all night. He told us he thought they were going to kill him. I had an old blue pickup with stock racks on it and I said “where are the bastards, do you know the car?” I had done a drag show and had a pair of heels in the truck. It was on a Sunday and there was no traffic (on Classen Boulevard), and all of the sudden Hugh said “there they are.” Since nothing could really hurt my truck, I plowed right into them--they didn’t know what hit them. One of them came out and I just knocked the shit out of him and I reached over and picked one of my high heels up and just planted it in his forehead. Blood was all over, and Hugh said “you’re going to kill him!” and I said “let him die—look what they did to you.” After that, they (teenagers) were scared of us. I was just a little person...⁹⁰

Another incident, which occurred in 1950, illustrated that queer residents would fight back with deadly force if necessary. It involved the Hi-Lite Club, also known as the Night Winds Club, located at 4910 North Lincoln. By all accounts, gay men loved this short-lived club, an unusual one of the period in that it was situated outside of the downtown area.⁹¹ One of the club’s patrons returned to his automobile early one Sunday morning to retrieve some photographs to show friends, when a large group of teenagers attacked him. Hearing the commotion outside, the club owner and several acquaintances ran outside and attempted to help the man. The young men later admitted that they came to the Hi-Lite Club to assault as many patrons as they could find, and they apparently formed a sizeable mob. At some point, the owner fired a pistol into the crowd and wounded one of the teenagers. After investigating the incident, the Oklahoma City

⁹⁰ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005.

⁹¹ *The Oklahoma City Times*, 7/24/1950, 3. The *Times*, the evening edition published by the *Daily Oklahoman*, alleged that the men at the club were targeted for making inappropriate advances to children at a local theater. This is impossible to substantiate but seems unlikely. One of the boys who assaulted the bar patron made the claim as prosecutors attempted to file charges against those involved. He had a vested interest in making the men seem as unseemly as possible. Also the bar’s owner admitted being a “pervert” when authorities questioned him, a term normally reserved for homosexuals by Oklahoma City police.

police shut the club down. They had “known for some time” that this was a club for perverts, but the shooting incident was the final straw.⁹²

What is striking about the presence of a number of gay and gay-friendly bars in Oklahoma City before 1960 was the relatively modest level of harassment that bar owners and patrons faced from the police. To be fair, gay and bisexual men were arrested at Bishop’s Tap Room, the Circus Room, and the Mayflower from time to time, but raids on these establishments usually occurred only in conjunction with larger liquor or vice raids on all downtown Oklahoma City establishments.⁹³ A major reason that the police allowed these institutions to exist under the radar was blatant corruption. Police officers walking beats downtown frequently took bribes from bar owners, hotel keepers, and other establishments that walked a thin line between respectability and illegality. The bribes included cash payments made to groups of officers monthly, but they also included agreements to employ off-duty officers as security guards and bouncers. In a sense, this represented a kind of informal regulation on the part of the police, augmented by the willingness of gay and bisexual men to remain somewhat circumspect, to allow homosexuals the freedom to thrive while keeping the general public in the dark. So long as the entertainment occurred inside the establishments, all went well in this symbiotic relationship. It was a quasi-visible red light district for homosexuals. “It (Mayflower) was raided several times,” remembers Lance. “When Bill was the bootlegger...there (were) prices he could pay for protection and all of that. It was all set up.”⁹⁴

⁹² “Youth Is Shot In Club Fight,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/24/1950, 1.

⁹³ This issue is discussed more fully in chapter five.

⁹⁴ Quote taken from Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005; Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, Oklahoma City, 2/19/2005 and 6/29/2005; Gil Ray,

Another factor that gave men sexual license downtown, and it grew somewhat from the corruption in the police department, was the weak enforcement of already weak laws. Most men arrested for some kind of sexual offense, whether soliciting or engaging in prostitution or having sex in public, were arraigned in city court under the broad charge of disorderly conduct.⁹⁵ This created advantages for both the police and those charged. First, defendants frequently gave false addresses and used pseudonyms, and the police knew this and rarely checked. In a sense this became a survival strategy for gay and bisexual residents, a way for them to fight the constraints placed upon their subculture by civil authorities. Second, the fine remained pitifully small---\$15 or \$20---even into the 1960s, so the defendants could afford to plead guilty, pay the fine, and get on with their lives. For Oklahoma City, the fines generated some revenue, and the broad charge of being disorderly was very discretionary, meaning defendants rarely challenged the charges and arrest-to-conviction ratios looked good for the police.⁹⁶ Officers

interview by author, 4/20/2005, Oklahoma City; Jim Fortenberry, follow-up interview by author, 7/3/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 2/11/2005; G.J.P., interview by author, 7/15/2005; Linda Cole, telephone interview by author, 6/29/2005; Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005. Every participant interviewed that worked in the entertainment or bar trade in Oklahoma City noted how easy -- and necessary -- it was to get along (bribe) with beat cops.

⁹⁵ Beemyn, "A Queer Capital," 212-213; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 185-186; Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love*, 50; D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 293-294; Tim Retzliff, "Cars and Bars: Assembling Gay Men in Postwar Flint, Michigan," in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*. Brett Beemyn ed. (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), 238-239. According to Beemyn, in Washington, D.C., the bond for disorderly conduct was \$25, and most defendants chose to forfeit that instead of fighting the charge and adding to their embarrassment. In fact, 2/3 of the over 983 misdemeanor disorderly conduct charges made there between 1947 and 1950 were handled in exactly that manner. This was a very common approach authorities took to policing gay and bisexual subcultures all over the United States. In New York, this system was in place already before World War I.

⁹⁶ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

appeared tough on vice, revelers enjoyed their fun, and the Oklahoma City gay male subculture operated just under the radar. Residents usually took great care, however, in using pseudonyms or they might be lost in the system. Jim Fortenberry remembers that once, during a raid at the Mayflower that included news coverage via local television stations, the police questioned and booked a good lesbian friend of his who went through the drill of giving false personal information to the police. “We didn’t know what name she used at the station, so it took us three days to get her bailed out!”⁹⁷

The Mayflower remained open until early 1964, when according to the *Daily Oklahoman*, it suffered a major fire and over \$10,000 in damages.⁹⁸ The owners of the establishment decided that this was too much to justify rebuilding, so they razed the building and the property became a parking lot for the Mayflower Theater located next door. The Mayflower played an important role in the emergence of the Oklahoma City gay male world. It was the first openly gay bar in Oklahoma City and the longest running gay bar of its era, remaining in business at least six years. The significance of the Mayflower Lounge reached beyond Oklahoma City, as Johnny Carson mentioned its demise on the *Tonight Show*.⁹⁹ Gay and lesbian city residents used the Mayflower as an anchor, around which the sexual and social activities of their subculture revolved. Its passing left a huge gap in that world.

⁹⁷ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

⁹⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/31/1963. Residents cannot seem to agree on exactly when the Mayflower closed. All agree that a devastating fire on New Years Eve was the catalyst for its closure. The year is usually given as 1964 or 1965. This fire, with a \$10,000 damage estimate, was probably the one that led to closure.

⁹⁹ The reference to Johnny Carson mentioning the demise of the Mayflower on the *Tonight Show* came from interviews with Linda Cole, 6/29/2005, and Ralph Prevette, 1/12/2005. Cole was a long-time bar maid at the Mayflower.

Traditionally, gay bars were essential elements in building a sense of community and group identity in gay subcultures all over the United States,¹⁰⁰ and that was certainly true of those located in Oklahoma City. Before the Homophile movement took off or people started coming out, bar owners were some of the only community heroes around. They started and maintained places of socialization where gay and bisexual men could feel safe, express their sexuality, and come back again and again. The lengths that bar owners went to ensure that clubs stayed open – paying off police officers, ministers, and city employees for protection; bailing out patrons arrested in their bars – gave gay and bisexual men support that they rarely received elsewhere. Many never forgot the sacrifices people like Bill Mitchell, Roger Pritchard, Red Holder, Park Bingham, Arnold Lee, or Leona Pierce made on their behalf and remained loyal to them until the day their bars closed. In Oklahoma City, the population of gay and bisexual men was not large enough to facilitate the growth of gay neighborhoods, support a gay-themed community newspaper, or even consider political activity for gay rights for several decades. Bars provided some of the only public, non-sexual socialization centers open to gay and bisexual men, and the community held on to them dearly.¹⁰¹

Although gay and bisexual men could find any number of outlets for sex, alcohol, and socialization in Oklahoma City proper, the need to be discreet led many residents to seek such comforts just outside of city limits, and a small enclave of establishments

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge Press, 1993), 10; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 335-350; Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 62-80.

¹⁰¹ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Ginger Lamar, interview by author, 9/10/2004; Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005.

appeared that catered to that group. The rationale was simple enough. Bars and nightspots located outside of Oklahoma City remained immune to harassment or exorbitant payoffs to city police officers, to say nothing of being shielded from religious authorities and nosy neighbors. Hard liquor was served in most of the Oklahoma County nightspots, while all of the gay and lesbian establishments in Oklahoma City served only beer. State officials rarely policed individual establishments, outside of enforcing liquor license laws, but this was of no concern to nightspots without licenses in the first place. This left the Oklahoma County Sheriff's office as the last source of authority that might intrude on revelers' fun. That force was woefully inadequate in the 1950s and according to respondents not much to worry about. "The county guys, as a general rule, they are much like they were in Los Angeles---they didn't want any trouble and they were easy to pay off. Sheriffs' offices are rather simple in their corruption."¹⁰² A final reason these places remained popular with gay and bisexual men was that they allowed some of the most complete mixing of gays, straights, and lesbians, in the history of Oklahoma City. In these establishments, opportunity for sex or socialization was tantamount to their success, not the gender or sexual preference of their clientele. Accordingly, people of all sexual appetites congregated at these places.

Pat's place was one of the most notorious nightspots to ever open in Oklahoma County.¹⁰³ Located near the corner of Pennsylvania and Grand Avenue, it was a large old home at the end of a long secluded driveway. The owners gutted the interior walls to

¹⁰² Quote from Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2004; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/15/2005.

¹⁰³ This speakeasy is often conflated with Pat's Club, a joint opened by a pair of retired Oklahoma City police detectives in the 1950s located on May Avenue.

create a huge dance floor and it saw plenty of action. Pat's also contained giant windows, a very useful feature if the county sheriff made an occasional visit. Pat's was open every weekend by the late 1940s and offered hard liquor as well as beer for thirsty patrons, a fact that instantly set it apart from other establishments in Oklahoma. Although well-known and notorious, Pat's held its share of secrets, including the identity of the owners. None of the participants can remember who owned the club, or why it was called Pat's, yet most of the old timers remember it well. "We danced until dawn, night after night. Everybody that you never saw other places went to Pat's." ¹⁰⁴

Another spot and territory, both sharing the same name, that offered gay and bisexual men a wild place to socialize was Green Pastures.¹⁰⁵ Most of the establishments located in Green Pastures were owned by African Americans, a fact that made even the appearance at such a place by Caucasians taboo. Whites did not return that courtesy, however, as blacks were not allowed in and did not frequent predominantly white bars until the 1970s:

A lot of times when everything would close down, we would go out to the black joints, and that's where they were. It was a territory. A lot of the gay kids went there...a lot of dykes went there. Back then, almost every one of the butch dykes had a chippie that prostituted, and the girls worked and roamed those places, and they were accepted. We had very few (blacks that came in to white bars in OKC) however.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Jim Fortenberry, follow-up interview by author, 7/2/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 8/9/2005. When Pat's first opened is unclear. Most remember it being open by 1947, although others recall it was first around in the early 1950s.

¹⁰⁵ Green Pastures is a euphemism for the rolling hills and fertile farm tracts found in eastern Oklahoma County. At least one of the clubs popular here was also called Green Pastures.

¹⁰⁶ Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005.

Establishments in Green Pastures were also not necessarily gay bars, either, but gays and lesbians took advantage of the licentious atmosphere to greatly expand the geographic circle of socialization. African Americans probably did not give it much thought, as they undoubtedly found running a legitimate operation within Oklahoma City limits rather difficult. An unincorporated area, free of official harassment and well-situated -- as a large number of African Americans lived east of Oklahoma City -- meant that black bar owners remained much more tolerant of non-normative social and sexual behavior exhibited by paying customers. Like Pat's, establishments in Green Pastures were located outside the jurisdiction of the Oklahoma City Police, and the County Sheriff rarely stopped by, so these places stayed open until dawn, sold bootleg liquor at exorbitant prices, and attracted many of the revelers forced to vacate downtown establishments after midnight. Green Pastures, the bar, was the best of the worst, and remained open until the 1960s:

Green Pastures was an after hours place on the eastern outskirts of the black ghetto, way out off of Northeast 36th Street. It was a shack that sold booze illegally after hours to anyone who could crawl in the door. Management must have had undercover bouncers working the crowd, because there was never any trouble and the crowd was *really* drunk. Also very mixed---straight, gay, black, white, young, old, rich, poor---you name it. Of course the payoffs to the cops eventually crippled the place. I am sure it was a cover for drug dealing, pussy-peddling, and mopperty and doppery in general, but it was a fun place on a strictly occasional sort of basis.¹⁰⁷

That mixing of people, of all races and sexual appetites, was unusual in most American cities, even larger ones like Buffalo, New York City, or Philadelphia. While African-Americans rarely frequented bars owned by whites in Oklahoma City, white gays and lesbians almost universally visited African-American establishments in eastern

¹⁰⁷ Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, 2/19/2005 and 6/29/2005.

Oklahoma County. Also notable here was that gay men and lesbians frequented the same places. In Washington, Detroit, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and New York City, lesbians and gay men usually socialized separately.¹⁰⁸ In Oklahoma City, the number of places gays and lesbians could go, by comparison, was smaller, especially for lesbians. As a result, they often found themselves at Pat's, Green Pastures, or the Mayflower right along with the boys.

By the early 1950s, several bars and restaurants that catered almost exclusively to homosexuals existed in Oklahoma City. By World War II, Bishop's Tap Room was the spot for gays and lesbians to socialize, commune, and get picked up, but it was ostensibly a straight club that "went gay" after hours. It nonetheless remained a popular hangout into the 1960s. The Mayflower, the Circus Club, and the Blue Lounge catered to a gay clientele from the start, and although the Circus and the Blue closed after only a short period, they reopened under different names but still remained primarily gay. Two restaurants that served as important sources of community development were Bishop's Restaurant and Beverly's Grill. Both were by all appearances straight restaurants, but queer men used them as important gathering points and socialization centers. All of these institutions operated in full view of the police and religious authorities. Other

¹⁰⁸ Brett Beemyn, "A Queer Capital," 185-188; Rory Thorpe, "The Changing Face of Lesbian Bars in Detroit, 1938-1965," in *Creating A Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, Brett Beemyn ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 166-178; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Marc Stein, *The City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 61-69. Stein argues that in Philadelphia, gays and lesbians shared space when necessary, but preferred to have their own establishments whenever possible. Nan Boyd found much the same thing to be true in her *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

establishments sprang up just outside of Oklahoma City city limits and offered patrons a wilder atmosphere in which to socialize. Places like Pat's Club and a number of bars in Green Pastures operated in direct violation of state liquor laws, and the licentious behavior made possible by their location probably made gay men and women more emboldened.

The overall openness of the Oklahoma City sexual landscape located downtown, coupled with an almost open disdain for police and their procedures, suggests that working-class gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City were not terribly concerned with the police or what charges they might face, but preferred to spend their time focusing on revelry and community. This is in contrast to what scholars found in Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York City. For New York, Chauncey argued that "the state built a closet in the 1930s, and forced gay people to hide in it." Jim Fortenberry remembers traveling to New York as late as the 1940s and being amazed at how much more vivacious the Oklahoma City gay world was. Everywhere he looked were signs that warned men not to dance or touch each other. "Oklahoma City was wide open in comparison." Although much smaller than the gay Meccas in terms of population, Oklahoma City was certainly not closeted.¹⁰⁹ The success enjoyed by gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City in establishing socialization centers, places for sexual liaisons, and maintaining a public presence, at a time when this was increasingly difficult in other parts of the United States, strongly questions the efficacy of considering the subcultures

¹⁰⁹ David Johnson, "The Kids of Fairy Town: Gay Male Culture on Chicago's Near North Side in the 1930s." in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, Brett Beemyn ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 112-113; Stein, *The City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 17-41; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 9; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

in New York, Philadelphia, or San Francisco as representative of gay sexuality in the United States, and certainly the western United States.

Chapter IV
Female Impersonation in Oklahoma City:
The Rise and Fall of the Inferno

The importance of female impersonation, or drag, to the formation and support of gay male subcultures in the United States is well-documented. During World War II, female impersonators and the myriad of routines they performed were just as vital as the USO troupes to the war effort. Gay soldiers entertained, socialized, and expressed their sexuality in “open disguise,” one that remained relatively free from public scorn. In fact, during the casting and staging of these shows, many gay soldiers found one another and formed support networks. The importance of these shows led military officials to shield performers from insinuations regarding their sexuality, working with the press to promote the recreational and therapeutic value inherent in the productions. Straight soldiers enjoyed the entertainment and found validation of their masculinity in shows that often poked fun at effeminate men.¹

Drag also solidified a queer presence in entertainment districts and nightspots, literally and psychologically, from the turn of twentieth century. In New York City, the “pansy craze” of the late 1920s and 1930s brought the gay subculture that had been percolating along the periphery of the city in places like Harlem and Greenwich Village

¹ Alan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 67-95.

into the main artery of Times Square. Drag played a crucial role in that transformation, as it merged with Prohibition-era excess and kept gay and bisexual men at the center of nighttime entertainment and encouraged them to brazenly carve out a niche for themselves in New York.² In Seattle, the world-renowned Garden of Allah provided post-World War II gay and lesbian residents a haven in which to explore their sexuality and communicate with the subculture that was only then beginning to test the limits of public acceptance and tolerance. As a visual manifestation of otherness, and by living authentic gay lives thanks in part to the support tendered by the Garden, those drag queens did as much for the development of a queer political consciousness in Seattle as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society.³ In Chicago in the 1950s, building on over twenty years of popularity, “Finnie’s Balls” were held at Halloween and on New Year’s Eve. Hundreds of residents attended, people of all races and sexual orientations. Of even greater significance was the fact that all of this occurred at a time when being gay in the United States was becoming much more problematic.⁴ In San Francisco, drag was important to the latent gay and lesbian subculture, but it was also big business. One of the most notorious drag bars in San Francisco, Finocchio’s, was a straight bar that

² George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 301-319, 327-329.

³ Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah: A Gay Cabaret in Seattle* (New York: Columbia Press, 1996); Gary L. Atkins, *Gay Seattle: Stories of Exile and Belonging* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 59-68.

⁴ Allen Drexel, “Before Paris Burned: Race, Class, and Male Homosexuality on the Chicago South Side, 1935-1960,” in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge, 1997). Alfred Finnie, a black gambler and male prostitute from Chicago, held his first ball in 1935. After his death in 1943, the annual events continued, sometimes up to five times annually, and drew attention from national publications aimed at African Americans such as *Ebony* and *Jet*.

catered to tourists, by design. People came to sample the exotic---and excellent---talents featured nightly at the bar.⁵ In cities all over the United States, both large and small, drag served important functions---everything from homosexual communal support and a coded means to ape straight society, to a viable means to make a living and more openly express alternative sexualities.

Female impersonation first became a socially acceptable form of entertainment during the late nineteenth-century, which paralleled the crest in popularity of American vaudeville.⁶ Vaudeville encompassed a wide range of dramatic, comedic, and minstrel productions that produced a unique brand of entertainment normally found in the concert saloons and large entertainment districts of larger cities. People of all classes came to watch, if only out of curiosity, but by and large vaudeville remained the purview of upper-middle and upper-class men and women. Vaudeville provided female impersonators with valuable training, a medium with which to push for cultural legitimacy, and a steady income. It was not unheard of for large venues to pay acts between \$100 and \$200 a week. By the early 20th century, most cities of even moderate size had an opera house or concert hall in which the emerging vaudeville circuit system sent touring companies of diverse acts. In a way, vaudeville houses were the forerunners

⁵ Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 49-56.

⁶ The term “female impersonator” in this chapter refers generally to any man who sought to create the illusion of womanhood for entertainment and/or monetary gain. They sang in their own voice or lip-synced to music, made elaborate costumes or bought off of the rack, studied the talent of those they impersonated or created their own illusion, and generally speaking were gay. Purists will draw greater distinctions between impersonators and drag queens, but my emphasis is on the *intent* of the performers, not the level of success at achieving womanhood.

of movie theaters and were quite effective at introducing Americans to new forms of entertainment.⁷

Oklahoma City was certainly no stranger to vaudeville in general and female impersonators in particular. The Lyric Theater on the corner of Grand Avenue and Harvey, an open-air structure, advertised for “Advanced Vaudeville” in the summer of 1908. In addition to dance artists and song performances, the Lyric had a “Lyriscope” on which the latest moving pictures could be viewed. Also offered at the Lyric was entertainment provided by one Lou Bates, a “famous female impersonator” according to advertisements.⁸

A decade later, one of the premier female impersonators of all time came to Oklahoma City, and he made quite an impact. Born William Dalton in Massachusetts in 1883, Julian Eltinge pushed the craft of female impersonation more fully into comedy and glamour. He toured the world and made huge sums of money at times promulgating his own unique brand of musical theater and illusion. Eltinge set the stage for later female impersonators by investing the medium with a sense of respectability and legitimacy it previously had lacked.⁹ On August 23, 1919, Eltinge and his Revue stopped for at least two nights at the Overholser Opera House in Oklahoma City. The Overholser was an imposing structure, built in 1903 and located at 217 West Grand Avenue. It seated close to 2500 people, was four stories high, and offered patrons

⁷ One of the most thorough historical treatments of female impersonation in the United States to date is Thomas A. Bolze, “Female Impersonation in the United States, 1900-1970” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1994), 24-30.

⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/12/1908, 22.

⁹ Bolze, “Female Impersonation,” 39-55, 59.

leather seating and toilets on each floor. When built, the Overholser boasted of having the largest stage in the West.¹⁰ Eltinge's stop was part of his larger world-wide tour, and the revue included a cast of over forty people. That it was the opening act for the Overholser Theater's dramatic season, and that the Revue returned for another two-night engagement in October 1919, speaks to the respect accorded Eltinge and the popularity of female impersonation in Oklahoma City from an early date.¹¹

By the dawn of the 1930s, however, female impersonators found their craft in transition. This was the byproduct of cultural and economic changes spawned by the Great Depression. As Thomas Bolze argues, the practice lost some of its popularity and perceived respectability with the ascendance of other forms of entertainment, like movies and radio. The venues where female impersonators were usually welcomed shifted away from stage and theaters and into nightclubs and speakeasies. This movement was made easier by the fact that the number of nightclubs in the United States skyrocketed with the end of Prohibition in 1933, which paradoxically meant more opportunities for female impersonators to perform as it simultaneously branded it as entertainment suitable primarily for working-class people. The movement to nightclubs and the decline in vaudeville in general also initiated another change, one that forever stigmatized the performance and its practitioners. By the 1930s, the general public almost universally

¹⁰ *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/23/1919, section C, 13; Terry L. Griffith, *Oklahoma City: Land Run to Statehood* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), 7; Roy P. Stewart, *Born Grown: The Story of Oklahoma City* (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank, National Association, 1974), 88-90. Henry Overholser, one of Oklahoma City's founding fathers, refused to lease his hall out to any Democrat, for he was a rock-ribbed Republican.

¹¹ *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/5/1919.

assumed that female impersonators were homosexual. Before, performers expected and received polite indifference to their sexuality in a theater setting. With the growth of nightclubs and the movement of the performances to them almost exclusively, a stigmatization of the performers' sexuality, and impersonation in general, followed. Arguably, it continues to the current time.¹²

This did not, however, mean that impersonators found it difficult to find places to perform in Oklahoma City. In fact, the relatively high number of nightclubs and bars meant that jobs were easier to come by, post-Prohibition. A club located just south of Oklahoma City known as The Garden of Allah, a name likely inspired by the 1936 film starring Marlene Dietrich and Charles Boyer, hosted female impersonators regularly enough that they could afford to pay out-of-town performers. In 1938, a group of five female impersonators, all from the Midwest and East, appeared at the Garden to large audiences and brought a performance style that quickly earned it the attention of authorities. On February 9th, all five of the men, wearing wigs and various evening attire, were arrested by Oklahoma County sheriff deputies at the Garden. The officers responded to complaints that a "rough" floor show was staged nightly at the club, and investigators confirmed that a bubble dance and striptease were occurring. Prosecutors charged the five men with outraging public decency and held them on \$1000 bond, a considerable sum in 1938. Unable to post bail, the impersonators languished at the Oklahoma County jail for almost a month while prosecutors and sheriff deputies argued over their disposition. Deputies wanted to release the men on condition that they leave Oklahoma and never return. County attorneys wanted the men to serve jail time,

¹² Bolze, "Female Impersonation," 230-248, 322-326.

especially when it became clear they were gay or bisexual. On March 1, 1938, Judge Charles Conner warned the performers that they had been very lucky: “If they catch you down here, sometimes they don’t put you in jail but just take care of the matter some other way.” When presented with the option of parole provided they leave the state immediately, all five shouted “We will leave right away.”¹³

Although the performers in the Garden episode were stung by the legal system in Oklahoma, this did not discourage other female impersonators from testing the waters in Oklahoma City, including at the Garden. The club remained open thereafter and eventually became Louie’s 29 Club, owned by longtime Oklahoma City entrepreneur Louis Strauch. Louie’s 29 Club booked Mr. Adrian Ames, billed as “Hollywood’s Favorite Female Impersonator,” in 1950 as its premier dinner club attraction.¹⁴ In 1955, Louie’s also offered the exotic talents of one “Bonita Secret,” famous for her Indian Drum Dance. Later that year, Larry Lombard brought his Calumet City Special routine, an exotic dance performance, to the club as well.¹⁵ Louie’s would go on to host more elaborate impersonation shows and be a favorite of local residents, gay and straight, for years thereafter.¹⁶

¹³ *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/9/1938, 1, 2/10/1938, 21, 2/20/1938, 30, and 3/1/1938, 11. The Garden was located at 2929 SW 29th. All but two of the record jackets at the Oklahoma County Sheriff’s Office on these men were empty. Two contained FBI record searches, signed by J. Edgar Hoover, describing the men as having been arrested and found guilty of “inversion,” or being homosexual, at some point.

¹⁴ *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/23/1950 and 7/30/1950, entertainment section.

¹⁵ See advertisements in the *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/7/1955 and 10/2/1955.

¹⁶ GJP, Interview by author, 3/18/2005.

By the dawn of World War II, the popularity of traveling female impersonation shows rivaled any regular club appearances by local performers, and the most famous and enduring of these was the Jewel Box Revue. Originally produced in Miami's Jewel Box Club in 1939 by entertainers determined to reestablish the mystery and artistry of impersonation, the Revue featured sophisticated stage shows. Bejeweled men with meticulous costumes danced, sang in their own voices, and quite often impersonated famous celebrities against a diverse backdrop of sets. The Revue made several stops in Oklahoma City in the 1950s. The *Daily Oklahoman* carried articles detailing the Revue, which it called "one of the most elaborate productions to be staged in a night club." Several of the most famous participants in the Revue came---T.C. Jones, La Verne Cummings, Jackie Mayer and more formed the core of the 90-minute shows, which were performed three times nightly. Ricky Renee, owner of a \$10,000 costume array that included a solid rhinestone dress and mink coat, wowed crowds in 1954 with his split second wardrobe changes. By all accounts, the Revue was well-received, as the Derby Club booked the group for weeks at a time and opened on Sunday evening just to accommodate the overflow crowds. The Revue played at other clubs too, including Louie's 29 Club. One local entertainer, himself a female illusionist, remembered that "the traveling Jewell Box reviews (held at Louie's) had a huge impact on the Oklahoma City drag scene. That placed was packed when they came---gay or straight it didn't matter."¹⁷

¹⁷ Bolze, "Female Impersonation," 335; *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/5/1953, 82, 4/26/1953, 92 (quote taken), 3/21/1954, 2/27/1955, 3-E, and 5/17/1957; Quote provided by GJP, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 3/18/2005. The Derby Club was, by all accounts, a predominantly straight nightclub located at 3133 NE 23rd. Louie's Club 29 was located at 2929 SW 29th.

Throughout the 1950s, the Jewel Box Revue made stops at the Derby or Louie's and stayed over for extra performances. It was one of the most popular attractions in Oklahoma City when it arrived, just as it was when it played in other parts of the country. According to patrons, not once was any club that sponsored the Revue raided or its patrons harassed. This likely had something to do with the fact that patrons and police alike accorded these performers with a modicum of respect. By the 1950s, people assumed that female impersonators were homosexual, a shift from the earlier vaudevillian conceptualization of impersonation as performance art, with no thoughts about the performers' sexuality.¹⁸ The quality of the shows, however, mitigated any perceived threat that the performers' sexuality offered. As Carol Durrell, a participant with the Revue in the early 1960s, wryly noted, "People who called you 'faggot' and 'sissy' out on the street were suddenly in awe of your talent." The vocal, comedic, and dance routines resembled tamer versions of well-known burlesque reviews, so if the shows started early enough in the evening, some people brought their families to enjoy them. The performances contained enough gay symbolism and camp, however, that gay and bisexual men found them appealing as well. In this way, female impersonators gained a sense of empowerment and respect from their audiences, gay or straight.¹⁹

¹⁸ Bolze, "Female Impersonation," 320-350, 394-95. Bolze argues that after the 1920s, female impersonation increasingly became associated with shadier nightclubs, was frequently targeted by police and morals crusaders, and was hammered by ever-hardening gender and sex roles. Indeed, the "nightclub phase" of female impersonation was viewed as a retreat from respectability, although many performers still made a fine living and traveled all over the country performing.

¹⁹ Ibid., 376-377.

These and other examples indicate that female impersonation remained a popular, socially acceptable medium of entertainment put on display at Oklahoma City nightclubs, even as the artists were universally assumed to be homosexual. Part of their success stemmed from the fact that they catered primarily to straight audiences at first. Once they gained support in that arena, female impersonators became fixtures at gay clubs and nightspots all over Oklahoma City. Drag queens did not compromise their integrity or relinquish their ability to transform perceptions about gay men by doing this, however.

The very compelling and contradictory nature of the performances made them provocative entertainment for straight men and women, and a powerful expression of protest, both formal and informal, for the performers. As other scholars argued, drag is in many ways a “performing protest,” an entertainment medium that supports traditional sexual categories and gender expectations at the same time it challenges them.²⁰ By poking fun at heterosexuals, often in a very graphic manner, and then turning the tables and poking fun at themselves, female impersonators immediately disarmed their heterosexual counterparts and made poignant commentaries about gender and sexuality. The presence of female impersonators in clubs provided straight audiences with safe, provocative entertainment that reinforced Cold War-era gender expectations. During the 1950s, when communism seemed to be an aggressive, destructive menace that high-ranking government officials supposedly aided, Americans turned inward and viewed any non-normative sexual or personal habits with suspicion, as threats to domesticity.

²⁰ Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), chapter ten. Rupp and Taylor’s work studies the role drag played in forging a sense of community within the 801 Cabaret in Key West, Florida, and in the community at large. Drag as a form of social protest is also a fixture in Esther Newton’s classic study, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972, 1979).

Homosexuals represented quintessential threats to domesticity and the family, as they lived lives unencumbered by children, mortgages, and monogamy according to many. By forsaking heterosexuality, sometimes rather openly and successfully, they threatened the neat categorizations many Americans developed regarding men and women's roles in the home, the workplace, and society. As Michael Kimmel reminds us, homosexuality like communism represented "gender failure," one that compromised an American male's mission, post-1945: being a father, providing an income for his family, and always being a model of modesty, strength, temperance, and silence.²¹ Seeing female impersonators challenge those norms, usually with humor and in a boisterous way, while constantly reminding audiences that they were gay, allowed straight patrons to feel good about their lot and gave gay men a means to express their talent and challenge hegemonic heterosexuality, all under the guise of a simple supper show. Performers and gay audience members alike walked a fine line between being "respectable" and "out." Neither was mutually exclusive of the other.²²

While "legitimate" places used female impersonators with some regularity in Oklahoma City, so too did establishments that operated on the fringes of respectability.

²¹ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 226-237; Barbara Ehrenreich suggests that this post-1945 male manifesto was so pervasive and powerful that it "kept heterosexual men in line as husbands and breadwinners....The ultimate reason why a man would not just 'walk out the door' was the taint of homosexuality which was likely to follow him" in *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (Garden City, New York: 1983), 26, 34.

²² Bolze, "Female Impersonation," 319-324; Allen Drexel, "Before Paris Burned," 122. For the complicated nature of gay-straight mixing in clubs in New York and Chicago, see Chad Heap, "'Slumming': Sexuality, Race, and Urban Commercial Leisure, 1900-1940." (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2000): 244-247.

A growing trend in Oklahoma City in the 1940s and 1950s was the appearance of drag balls, usually held at Halloween to avoid as much community hostility as possible. This medium shared much in common with shows held in nightclubs. People wore gowns, they spent a great deal of time and money on their costume, and they rehearsed their routines regularly. Also, contestants often sang in their own voice, something that is unheard of today. It was a terribly competitive enterprise: “People would say, ‘what are you wearing, bitch,’ and I’d reply, ‘fuck off,’” remembers Gil Ray.²³ An important and fundamental difference, however, was that the Halloween drag balls were exclusively targeted for the gay and lesbian audience in Oklahoma City. They were some of the first, real attempts to establish an overtly gay public presence in Oklahoma City, and if the crowds that attended these functions were any indication, they were very successful.²⁴

A surprising fact about drag ball culture in Oklahoma City was that some of the balls were held in the northeast sections of Oklahoma City, at clubs and establishments owned by and that catered to African Americans. This was very unusual in the history of racial and social relations in Oklahoma City proper, as blacks and whites usually stayed in their own establishments and avoided mixing. Organizers held one of the earliest balls at a club called “Eagle Nest” in northeast Oklahoma City, probably in 1954. In keeping with the segregation of races in clubs in Oklahoma City, black patrons were not initially allowed to see the show, even though Eagle Nest was owned and operated by African Americans. This was the first ball that local legend Gil Ray ever attended, and he remembered that “Everybody had a nice car to deliver us out to it, and we had gowns

²³ Gil Ray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/20/2005.

²⁴ Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005.

and everything. Those black folks went berserk over it. Whoever put it on leased it (the club) just for that night, but a lot of them (blacks) came in, even though they weren't supposed to." Another successful ball was held at Bryant Center, a community hub built for the African-American community by the state of Oklahoma in 1960. Within its 35,000 square foot confines were a huge dance floor, an orchestra pit, a sixteen-lane bowling alley, and a roller skating rink. Community groups frequently used Bryant Center for dances and parties, and some of the most well-known African-American entertainers made stops at the center, such as Sam Cooke, Fats Domino, Ike and Tina Turner, and Ben E. King. Sponsors for this 1960 event are unknown, but almost thirty contestants entered the drag show, which Gil Ray won with his signature rendition of "The Days of Wine and Roses."²⁵

It is both ironic and instructive that the Oklahoma City gay male world went to another minority subculture in order to flourish. In general, black and white worlds remained distinct in Oklahoma City, including at nightclubs and other social institutions. Although some racial intermingling occurred in jazz clubs located in Deep Deuce, it was far less common than separatism.²⁶ Whites preferred that blacks remained in the eastern part of town, shop in their own stores, and eat at their own restaurants. Blacks were probably content to oblige, if only to avoid confrontations with bigoted downtown

²⁵ Gil Ray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/20/2005. Bryant Center was located at 2701 NE 21st. See advertisements for these and other performers in the October 1960, November 1961, and January 1962 editions of the *Daily Oklahoman*.

²⁶ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998). Some of the most important jazz musicians in American history either started out or at least spent time at clubs like the Goody Goody or the Cave along Deep Deuce (2nd Street) in Oklahoma City. Here, the racial component of the bandstands and the crowds was more likely to be mixed than at any other spots in town.

residents and the police. It was common for whites, however, to attend festivities in a bar or community center located in African-American neighborhoods, and the Caucasians expected nothing to be said about it.²⁷

If drag balls aided gay and bisexual men in developing a sense of community, they were also very lucrative and successful business enterprises. Such was true of the legendary Halloween Balls in the 1950s sponsored by Roger Pritchard and Bill Mitchell, co-founders of the Mayflower. Pritchard and Mitchell held Halloween Balls all over Oklahoma County, and rented out large halls for them. One was held at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Hall in El Reno, one of the most rigidly masculine cultural institutions in Oklahoma. Upwards of 300 people attended, many from out of state.²⁸ Another ball was held at the Norman Country Club hall in an upstairs annex. “Everybody was just flowing in there. I felt like a real woman. Then, POW, everybody screamed ‘get out!’ The party was upstairs, but the bathrooms were downstairs where the straights were, and they didn’t know what kind of a party it was. So, away we went. We were just pushing people into cars...”²⁹ Still another ball was held at the Biltmore Hotel, whose basement contained a very popular tearoom for anonymous sex. Bill and Roger advertised by word of mouth at their club, the Mayflower, and news quickly spread throughout gay circles. Patrons bought a ticket and that entitled them to enjoy the show and the food

²⁷ Ron Owens, *Oklahoma Justice---The Oklahoma City Police: A Century of Gunfighters, Gangsters, and Terrorists* (Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing, 1995), 160-162. The Oklahoma City Police Department had a “colored” corps of officers that patrolled those beats east of Broadway and south of Reno in Oklahoma City, the area commonly referred to as “black town” or “nigger town”; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Ralph Prevetie, interview by author, 1/12/2005.

²⁸ Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005.

²⁹ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005.

and occasionally a band that played. More importantly, it gave men a chance to dress in drag, congregate with other gays and lesbians in public, and have a good time. And have a good time is exactly what the gay and bisexual male world did, when they could get the community at large to leave them alone. One of the reasons the balls moved from year to year was that they were rarely allowed back. Once community leaders realized what was going on, they tried to run the Halloween revelers off, and they refused to rent space to them again.³⁰

It was precisely for that reason that Roger Pritchard and Bill Mitchell started the Inferno, Oklahoma City's first so-called drag bar, in 1958. Located at 9200 South Shields across from Coots Service Station, the Inferno was wildly gay, wildly successful, and salient to the development of a sense of community in queer Oklahoma City. From the outside, the Inferno appeared rather inauspicious. Constructed of cinder blocks and decorated in a flame motif, the club had a single light out front, and patrons parked in the back. Inside, it was just a big open space with alcohol and a dance floor. Although the Inferno had a beer license, most patrons took advantage of the Inferno's location in unincorporated territory and brought their own bottles. Bill and Roger provided the ice and occasionally, food, for a small cover charge. Since Mitchell and Pritchard owned the Mayflower, their time was a bit circumscribed, so they opened the Inferno on weekends and holidays only. In addition, they leased the space out to gay and lesbian Oklahoma City residents for parties, birthday celebrations, anniversaries and such. In

³⁰ Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/20/2005.

that regard, the Inferno might correctly be considered the first community center for the gay and bisexual residents of Oklahoma City.³¹

The location of the Inferno was particularly important in the establishment's history and popularity. Although now part of Oklahoma City's city limits, the bar was situated in an unincorporated area of Cleveland County during the late 1950s. This meant that Oklahoma City police officers and Norman police officers had no jurisdiction over the place, and county sheriffs showed little interest in raiding the establishment at first. Since it fell out of the jurisdiction of the city authorities, the Inferno became a wild, bustling night spot, and age was rarely a barrier to entrance. As Jim McMurray relates:

The first bar I went to (Inferno) I looked around and thought, 'my God!' It was gay---anyone of any age could go, and the cops could not touch you. Now after you were through partying, you got in your car and sat there until you were sober, because the cops were waiting on each side. I started going there when I was 13. It was just a building, with female impersonators, shows, just wide-open. Of course they had tremendous business because, most gay men like young, young men.³²

Nor was age a barrier for performers. "Shelly Summers," the stage name of the late Michael Benham, started performing at the weekly drag shows at the Inferno when he was only fifteen-years-old and still a student at Classen High School. His teacher, Jim Fortenberry, remembers walking into the club one night and seeing his young student,

³¹ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 7/2/2005; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005; Linda Cole, interview by author, 7/11/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005. This was the standard way that Oklahomans drank alcohol in public between the end of statewide prohibition in 1959 and the passage of liquor-by-the-drink legislation, which is currently in place in forty-two of Oklahoma's seventy-seven counties. A liquor license was still required if liquor was consumed on the premises or if beer was sold.

³² Jim McMurray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/20/2005.

“decked out in miles of gingham,” performing for packed crowds. “At least it explained why he slept through my class.”³³

The crowd that attended events at the Inferno was a mix of lesbians as well as gay men, a fact that at first deflected attention from its core constituency and protected each group if things ever got hot. Much like the Green Pastures nightspots in eastern Oklahoma County, the Inferno served as an important point of gay and lesbian interaction, and by all accounts patrons seemed to get along rather well.³⁴ This was unusual, as gay bars in most other urban areas were segregated by sex.³⁵ The reason that gays and lesbians mixed so easily and often in Oklahoma City was two-fold. First, not enough gay bars existed in Oklahoma City in the 1950s to encourage “specialization,” or the growth of sex-segregated bars and nightspots. Mitchell and Pritchard actively courted lesbians, as they saw in them an untapped source of income. Second, it was a matter of convenience, especially during a raid. Men and women visiting with one another drew little suspicion, and a quick switch of dance partners meant that the Inferno looked like any other club by the time police finally got a look. Getting in was indeed a problem for authorities, as like a lot of other nightclubs across the country, the Inferno developed a distinct series of light cues that the management used to warn patrons of impending trouble with authorities. Red, blue, and white signal lights warned patrons to

³³ Jim Fortenberry, interview with author, 7/2/2005.

³⁴ Linda Cole, interview with author, 7/11/2005.

³⁵ See Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

hide their liquor, grab a member of the opposite sex, stop dancing, or stop having sex. Indeed, the Inferno provided a convenient place for gay men to hook up and have a sexual encounter. The toilet facilities consisted of long troughs, open on both sides, which gay and bisexual men often used to cruise other men for sex.³⁶

In some respects, the Inferno was just an average gay bar and might have remained so if not for the female impersonation shows held there almost every weekend. This represented an historic shift in the role and venues for female impersonation shows in Oklahoma City. Until the mid-1950s, shows were usually found in straight supper clubs and bars, or limited to special occasions like Halloween in rented spaces. As demonstrated earlier, the respectability and legitimacy that straight crowds infused female impersonation shows shielded the queens from harassment by religious and political authorities. By all accounts, the Inferno was the first show bar in Oklahoma City that catered exclusively to gay men and women. Its institutionalization of female impersonation fostered an important link that continues to date between gay bars and the medium.³⁷

The quality of the Inferno shows was very high, thanks primarily to the driving organizational efforts of Tony Sinclair. Tony Sinclair is easily the most well-known female impersonator ever to set up shop in Oklahoma. Supporters and detractors alike agree that he is a true impersonator, someone who works tirelessly to perfect

³⁶ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/27/2005.

³⁷ Bolze, "Female Impersonation," 348. Bolze argues that gay bars rarely used female impersonators except at Halloween and other special events. Esther Newton notes that most show bars where female impersonators performed regularly were almost universally owned and operated by straight men or couples. Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonation in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1972, 1979 edition), 4, note 10.

impersonations of famous celebrities and strike the illusion of femininity in general.³⁸

Anybody could dress like a woman and lip-sync to music, but Tony tried to *become* a woman when on stage.

Born back east as Tony Morrison, Sinclair toured the United States as a member of a drag troupe and allegedly starred at the Jewell Box Theater in Kansas City, a show bar loosely modeled after Hollywood's infamous tourist show bar, Finocchio's. One can assume he received much of his early training and impressionist skills while working with the Revue. Whether he first came to Oklahoma City during one of the Jewell Box engagements here is also unknown, but his first appearance in Oklahoma City was certainly after 1965, the date he often ascribes to his arrival. He advertised for unattached female dancers for his Inferno revue in 1960, and his presence at the Inferno in the late 1950s would indicate an earlier arrival than he remembers. Tony was an excellent wardrobe designer and tailor, and made specialized outfits for striptease artists and showgirls in Oklahoma City and the southwest, including legendary Dallas dancer, stripper, and burlesque entertainer Candy Barr.³⁹ It provided him with the skills necessary to make some of the dazzling wardrobe accessories for his Inferno troupe, and the "Boylesque" reviews he started later in his career. Although Sinclair made many of his elaborate costumes, he also borrowed some of the beautiful outfits he sold from

³⁸ As of this writing, Tony Sinclair still performs once weekly at the Hi-Lo Club and at Tramps, a popular bar owned by Tony and his lover, Hayden.

³⁹ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; For information about Barr, see "Candy Barr, Famous Exotic Dancer, Dies at Age 70," *Abilene Reporter-News*, 1/1/2006.

Payton-Marcus, the downtown department store in which Tony worked during the day.

He took them out on approval, used them, and then returned them to the store.⁴⁰

Sinclair was also tough, on himself and his girls, but he probably had to be. Traveling across the United States, dressing in kitchens, and performing in front of demanding audiences required an unparalleled degree of professionalism, especially during an age when the number of show bars in this part of the country was small. Noted for having a sharp tongue, Tony Sinclair inspired both loyalty and contempt in colleagues, and to this date the mention of his name is greeted with either a smile or a scowl.⁴¹

Although controversial, Tony Sinclair is definitely as shrewd as he is talented. Tony made a living for years performing at straight clubs all over the United States as well as in downtown Oklahoma City, a fact that kept him working and solidified his reputation as a professional. His self-deprecating humor and willingness to ingratiate himself to straight audiences kept him in high demand, and Sinclair was not viewed as a threat by his audiences.⁴² One of Tony's favorite spots to appear was the After-5 Club, located in the basement of the Hotel Black, at the northwest corner of Grand and Hudson. There Tony actually performed a strip-tease routine, much to the delight of standing-

⁴⁰ Paul Thompson, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 12/22/2005.

⁴¹ See "City Drag Queen Struts His Stuff." *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/19/1984, 201, for some facts about Sinclair's early years and his perspective on female impersonation. One interview subject believes Sinclair was from Cincinnati, Ohio. Sinclair advertised for unattached female dancers for a chorus line in the *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/19/1960, 52. See an advertisement in the *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/5/1964, 20, for the Dug-Out Club, 3407 NW 10th. Sinclair declined to participate in this research study when asked about the Inferno. See also "Tony's In The Spotlight," *Gayly Oklahoman* (February 1984), 21 or 31 (illegible on copy).

⁴² "Tony's In The Spotlight," *Gayly Oklahoman* (February 1984), 21 or 31 (illegible on copy).

room-only audiences. As Jim remembers: “He was absolutely, astronomically gorgeous....He gave my dad a lap dance and he (father) did not know it was a man until Tony took the wig off. He was awesome.”⁴³ Indeed, Sinclair made a living as a teenager stripping, as a woman, in straight clubs according to one long-time acquaintance. Ginger Lamar, another friend and legendary female impersonator in Oklahoma City, credits Sinclair with guiding and inspiring her career via the shows at the After 5 Club:

I saw Tony before I was legal to go out. I was 20 years old and most people won't remember this--it was the Hotel Black & the After 5 Club in the basement. Tony did a show, and I thought he was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life. Tony was so gorgeous. I would follow wherever he was. He worked at the Stage Door Club, over on South Robinson and he stripped-- he was a stripper. And I would go any time I could go---I was mesmerized by him. And, to this day a lot of what I've done with my career I've tried to pattern after what I've seen him do. Not to copy, because we're as opposite as we can be in looks and appearance. But, he has that class that I have always tried to get, and keep through the years.⁴⁴

Like any diva, Tony Sinclair refuses to divulge his age or early origins, and as a result both supporters and detractors alike have interesting stories to tell. “There is probably a whole other Tony Sinclair someplace made up of all of the skin he’s had nipped and tucked off,” laughed Paul Thompson, citing Sinclair’s legendary fascination with plastic surgery.⁴⁵ Another friend, who refused to be identified, stated that Sinclair is so fastidious about his appearance that if he sees a line on his face when he looks in the

⁴³ Jim McMurray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/20/2005.

⁴⁴ See “Ginger Speaks” and the topic “About Tony Sinclair” at Lamar’s website, www.gingerlamar.com.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

mirror, he puts his finger on it, drives over to his plastic surgeon's office, and says, "get rid of it!" Rumors persist that he lived and worked as a woman in the 1950s in Oklahoma City, that he is at least seventy-five years old, and that his drive to preserve his looks motivated him to have plastic surgeries, such as cheek and pectoral implants, long before they were commonly performed.⁴⁶

Personal peccadilloes aside, the significance of Tony Sinclair to the success of the *Inferno*, and the gay and bisexual community in Oklahoma City, cannot be denied. His influence in Oklahoma parallels that of Jose Sarria in San Francisco. Sarria started performing in drag at San Francisco's infamous bohemian bar – the Black Cat Café – in the 1940s, and his career blossomed well into the 1960s. Sarria's operatic parodies and campy humor thrilled audiences, as did his determination to defy the police and community leaders hostile to homosexuals. In an effort to convince fellow queer men of their worth, Sarria in 1961 ran for the office of city supervisor. He was one of the first openly gay office seekers in California, and although his candidacy failed, Sarria provided gay and bisexual men with a public, prominent role model at a crucial juncture in the political awakening of the San Francisco LGBT community.⁴⁷ Like Sarria, Tony Sinclair never hid his homosexuality, his love of female impersonation, or his willingness to support the gay community. In this regard, Sinclair was also a role model at a time

⁴⁶ Tony Sinclair acknowledges that he underwent plastic surgery in "City Drag Queen Struts His Stuff," *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/19/1984, 201. People that have known Sinclair for years had two kinds of Tony stories---those they would tell on the record, and those they told off the record. Those told off the record were considerably more colorful, and plentiful; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 8/13/2005. Arnold Lee states that Sinclair is "at least" as old as he is which would currently make him seventy-eight.

⁴⁷ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 187-190; Boyd, *Wide-Open Town*, 57-62.

when they were hard to come by for gay men in Oklahoma City, even outside of the bar culture. As Paul Thompson relates,

(Tony) was the first person I met that I knew for certain was gay. I worked for John A. Brown in display and he worked in the display department at Peyton-Marcus. I had friends that I worked with who knew I was gay and tried to get me to see it. Within the first year I worked at Brown's, one of them fetched me down the street to meet Tony Sinclair because they wanted me to meet a self-confessed gay person. Tony has done many things to help the community and present a different option of how to be, a more positive way to be...⁴⁸

In addition, Tony Sinclair is said to be the finest female impersonator ever to perform in Oklahoma City, with a reputation that stretches from coast to coast.⁴⁹ Tony encouraged all of the girls who trained under him to develop a talent -- preferably something live, like singing or dancing -- and to always be aware of the venue in which they were performing. Costumes were absolutely essential to the act, as was cultivating impressions of famous people. Sinclair impersonated a wide range of celebrities -- from Mae West to Marilyn Monroe to Diana Ross -- and he spent a great deal of time studying their performances and personal characteristics and mannerisms. One former protégé who learned from Tony and eventually worked in Las Vegas and Europe remembers that he was tough, but honest:

Tony is a real icon in the world of female impersonation. He is a perfectionist and has a sharp tongue. I learned so much from him. I think people outside Oklahoma would be greatly surprised how many people know of him...Because of his strict foundation of drag I learned how to do it all---make-up, hair, and costuming. To this day I still do most of my own costuming and all of my hair. I

⁴⁸ Paul Thompson, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 12/22/2004.

⁴⁹ Ginger Lamar, interview by author, 9/10/2004; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; GJP, interview by author, 3/18/2005 and 7/15/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005; Linda Cole, interview by author, 6/29/2005 and 7/11/2005; Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

was very unsure of so much stuff in those days. I worship the drag ground Tony walked on and wanted him to look at me as being good.⁵⁰

While Tony Sinclair was the highest profile performer in the Les Girls Revue, as the Inferno impressionist show was called, a number of other artists contributed their unique talents to the production and helped make it an enviable performance troupe. Gil Ray, he of the high kick, splits, acrobatic bar moves, and Broadway-style dance routines, used his small and athletic frame to provide the physical talent of the show and was generally considered the athlete of the group. He performed the final number of the show, which in his words meant his routine was “the best in town,” and occasionally that involved a strip tease. Gil was also known for his comedic talents and impressions of Judy Garland. Shelly Summers, stage name of the late Michael Benham who performed at the Inferno at the tender age of sixteen, became Sinclair’s protégé. He apparently modeled much of his later work after Sinclair. Shelly was a very small boy, according to Gil Ray, and the chorus boys picked him up and twirled him about with ease. Shelly did not lip-synch but sang live, something that was unusual even then, and this gave Les Girls Revue a show with few rivals. Tony’s lover, David Morrison, played the piano and put all of the music together for the show, and of course, Tony served as emcee.⁵¹ Six headliners---Tony, Shelly, Gil, Bobby, and two show boys---were complemented by three showgirls, each of whom wore headdresses that were ten feet tall. “It was a showstopper...It would be great to this day,” said Gil Ray. “We started doing really good drag, with music, large crowds. We had a wonderful group. If we weren’t

⁵⁰ Stephanie Williams, email interview, 1/21/2005.

⁵¹ Gil Ray, follow-up telephone interview by author, 8/9/2005.

rehearsing, rehearsing, rehearsing, we were beading dresses. Sometimes until 2:00 AM. The best thing in town!” Performers at the Inferno worked for tips, no doubt a scary proposition in 1950s Oklahoma City, but they made a lot of money. Bill and Roger tried to use them every weekend at the Inferno if possible, as they drew large crowds.⁵²

Given the elaborate costumes and grueling rehearsals, it was undoubtedly Tony Sinclair’s intention to start a troupe that rivaled the Jewell Box crew. Indeed, Les Girls Revue used the Inferno as a base from which they traveled to other clubs in Oklahoma and Texas, hoping to eventually tour the country. Tulsa, Dallas, and Fort Worth were spots the group visited. Once, the group traveled to Fort Worth where they had the unfortunate luck of performing at a club during a local election. The performers’ talent and courage, however, saved the day:

We went to Fort Worth once, while they were having an election for something and nobody told us. Le Girls Revue was there, and you could not get into that bar it was so crowded. Suddenly, the Texas Rangers, the Texas Liquor Board, and about 15 other authorities came down on us. I was out there doing the show, and had just done a high kick, when Tony said, “Queen! Queen! It’s a raid!!!!” They put us all in the back (paddy wagon) and Tony told us not to take any of our clothes off. We had showgirls, beautiful strong men, everything. Anyway, I had my jeans nearby and was going to change but the cops wouldn’t let me. So I went over to them, wearing pasties, and said, “Do you know what they call these in Chicago?---the Unsuckables!” Those guys just died laughing, and I was able to change. We all had to go to jail and pay a \$90 fine. They put us in the drunk tank, and what did we do but the whole damn show for them!⁵³

Frequent visitors noted that Mitchell and Pritchard took pains to make the club as raid-proof as possible, but given the popularity of the Inferno, and its location in an

⁵² Gil Ray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/20/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; “Tony’s In The Spotlight.” *Gayly Oklahoman* (February 1984).

⁵³ Gil Ray, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/20/2005.

unincorporated area, trouble proved difficult to avoid completely.⁵⁴ In February of 1959, only about a year after Roger Pritchard and Bill Mitchell opened the club, the Cleveland County Sheriff's office inspected several obscure county establishments. Three clubs – Louie's 700 Club, Edith's Place, and the Inferno -- were cited for a variety of offenses, including selling alcohol to minors. At the Inferno, deputies only cited Roger Pritchard for serving beer after midnight, a common though potentially serious charge. Whether it was the Inferno's refusal to freely admit city and county authorities or its reputation for being a notorious queer space that motivated the Cleveland County District Attorney, he asked for and received a revocation of the Inferno's liquor license. Now, Pritchard was no longer licensed to sell alcohol, and Bill Mitchell's felony bootlegging convictions precluded him from having a liquor license in the first place. From that moment, the Inferno was a dry club that only provided ice and set-ups to patrons until prohibition ended in 1959.⁵⁵

Later that summer, an even more serious brush with the law brought authorities to the Inferno once again, as a 29-year-old woman committed suicide inside the bar. County Sheriff Olen Garner found the woman's body, with a pearl-handled pistol nearby. Why the woman committed suicide, or why she chose to do so inside the Inferno is unclear, but these events, coupled with the chaotic personal relationship between Mitchell

⁵⁴ Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/26/2005.

⁵⁵ "Revoking Beer License Asked." *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/10/1959, 6; "Charge against Tavern Dropped by Norman Court." *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/4/1959, 12. Charges against Edith's Place were dropped after a complaining witness could not be located; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005.

and Pritchard, caused the two men to sever ties with the club.⁵⁶ After 1960, the Inferno was leased to Bill Kennedy, a married man who worked for OG&E, and he took even greater pains to make the club as raid-proof as possible. Kennedy secured liquor permits in both Oklahoma and Cleveland Counties, so whenever authorities tried to enter the place or demand a document check, he had papers in hand. Eventually, Kennedy moved to Dallas when the lease expired.⁵⁷ After that, Pritchard sold the Inferno to his mother in about 1962, who redesigned it as a country and western-themed bar. It closed shortly afterward.

The significance of the Inferno and the impressionists who worked there extended beyond the confines of the cinder blocked club on the Oklahoma-Cleveland County line. They were truly the first openly gay people that lived authentic gay lives in Oklahoma City. “I’ve never been a closet case,” Tony Sinclair once told an interviewer with the *Daily Oklahoman*, and he was correct, but many Oklahoma City residents who chose to remain closeted found refuge at the Inferno.⁵⁸ They could meet friends, have a drink, dance, and watch female impersonators defy the limits placed upon them by the Oklahoma City community at large. The very act of watching gay performers, in a gay

⁵⁶ “Body Found, Probe Starts.” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/19/1959, 17. According to the article, sheriff’s deputies were tipped off about the incident by the woman’s husband, who called an ambulance service and stated his wife was about to kill herself.

⁵⁷ According to all of the interview participants in note 26, Bill Kennedy, a married man, wanted to start a lucrative business -- “either a cockfight or a gay bar” according to one respondent -- so he leased the Inferno from Mitchell and Pritchard, probably in early 1960.

⁵⁸ “City Drag Queen Struts His Stuff,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/19/1984, 201.

club, was in some ways a pre-political coming out party for rank and file gay men at a time when the options for overt displays of queer sexual identity were circumscribed.⁵⁹

In many ways, the Inferno represented for gay men in Oklahoma City what the Garden of Allah represented for homosexuals in Seattle. Opened in 1946 in an old Victorian-era hotel in Seattle's Tin Pan Alley that had a history of providing illegal entertainment of all sorts, the Garden of Allah resurrected a once-thriving system of gay burlesque. The owners paid off the police and kept a relatively low profile, which allowed gays and lesbians to explore their sexuality and gender relationships unencumbered. The Garden contained a huge Wurlitzer organ and roughly 5000 square-feet of space, and regularly packed crowds in excess of 200 to watch the glamorous impersonators provide classic minstrel-show standards---the Prima Donna and the Dame, replete with Camp---as well as strip tease shows. Many of the regulars used their relationship with the Garden of Allah and the atmosphere of tolerance it provided to live openly as a gay man or woman. The actors actually performed---sang songs, made their own costumes when possible, choreographed the shows carefully, and generally made a living from their exploits at Allah. Nationally known impersonators like Ray Bourbon also stopped to perform at the Garden. Although it closed by the mid-1950s, the Garden's legacy was immense: it validated a gay subculture battered by a World War and a depression within a hostile society to create institutions of protection and affirmation. Being "out" at the Garden during a time of increased anti-gay hostility provided the confidence for gays and lesbians to form a political group consciousness and challenge

⁵⁹ For just such a concept, see Gary L. Atkins, *Gay Seattle: Stories of Exile and Belonging* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 59-68. This is still true today according to Rupp, *Drag Queens*, chapter 10.

City Hall in the 1960s and 1970s. The very act of entering, watching or participating in shows, and returning again and again was in essence a coming out party. The impersonators were also community heroes.⁶⁰

Thus it might be said that the real significance of the Inferno rests in the fact that it provided gay and bisexual men with one of the first truly, openly gay settings in which to congregate in Oklahoma City. There was never any doubt as to the sexuality of its patrons – or its owners -- unlike the other popular nightspots in Oklahoma City that catered to gay crowds after dinner, such as Bishop’s Tap Room or other establishments located outside city limits. It was queer from the beginning, by design, and its patrons absolutely loved it. Whatever it lacked in opulence or charm, the Inferno made up for in its furious abandon and licentious atmosphere, a place where queer Oklahoma City residents could be out. The performers were role models to the patrons and the fledgling gay community at large. “I don’t know anybody that was ‘out’ but the drag queens from that era,” related long-time political activist Bill Rogers. Tony Sinclair and Gil Ray parlayed their experiences and exposure at the Inferno into long-running careers in female impersonation and entertainment in Oklahoma City, and both are considered pillars in the gay community to this day.⁶¹ Part bar, part community center, and staffed with the most openly gay residents in Oklahoma City, the Inferno’s very existence encouraged others who were just starting to test the waters regarding their true sexual feelings to perhaps put a foot in, or even a leg. Female impersonation as an important

⁶⁰ Don Paulson, *An Evening at the Garden of Allah: A Gay Cabaret in Seattle* (New York: Columbia Press, 1996). Paulson, like Alan Berube and others, puts the gay bar as both a consequence of and center of post-World War II gay life; Atkins, *Gay Seattle*, 59-68.

⁶¹ Bill Rogers, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 9/18/2004.

source of information dissemination and subculture formation was cemented by the vivacious, albeit short run, of the Inferno.

Chapter V

Crackdown: The Oklahoma City Gay Male World on the Defensive

By the 1950s, the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male world operated with a reasonable amount of openness. Several bars and restaurants catered to them almost exclusively, and the police rarely bothered those establishments any more than straight clubs. Female impersonators found eager club owners and audiences that adored the unusual entertainment they provided. Men could enjoy plenty of anonymous sexual encounters at the older hotels and secluded public restrooms downtown, and private parties and informal get-togethers gave even the most retiring of gay and bisexual residents a gateway into an alternative sexual universe. That this queer subculture existed in a city long considered a bastion of conservatism is significant.

By the late 1950s, however, the elements that contributed to Oklahoma City's reputation for being homophobic came to the fore. The change occurred abruptly and accelerated throughout the 1960s, and the shift can be traced to several key developments. International politics and paranoia in the United States initiated a hysteria that altered the American social and political climate in many ways. Politicians, commentators, and citizens from all walks of life shared little use for anything unconventional, and they renewed the focus on issues like crime and other social ills. Oklahoma City was not immune to that. A perception lingered, both in Oklahoma City and across the United States, that Oklahoma City was a nightmare of vice and crime. In

response, watchdog citizen groups worked to expose corruption and vice. Their efforts resulted in the reorganization of the Oklahoma City Police Department, a change which allowed detectives to pursue homosexuals more easily. Second, prohibition in Oklahoma ended via statewide vote on April 7, 1959. Like the reorganization of the police department, the end of prohibition allowed authorities, both religious and political, to focus on other “vices” that seemed to consume the United States in the 1950s, such as homosexuality. In a sense, queer men were suffering for the openness and frivolity of earlier decades. Third, powerful people worked diligently to see that gay and bisexual men enjoyed little peace in Oklahoma City. In 1964, Oklahoma County residents elected as county attorney one Curtis Harris, a man whose efforts to remove homosexuals from Oklahoma City are legendary. Also, the *Daily Oklahoman* provided a huge deterrent to public gay male socialization. People caught in a compromising situation found their names in the newspaper under headlines like “vice” or “immoral” or “lewd.” These powerful interests used religious imagery for their own ends, denigrating gay and bisexual men and drumming up support for their continued crackdown on anything queer. As a result of these changes, Oklahoma City entered the 1970s more closeted and more intolerant of homosexuality than ever before, at a time when gay male subcultures in other parts of the United States were just coming into their own.

Although the Oklahoma City police allowed the gay community to establish itself and prosper, they never completely ignored queer establishments. Chapter three discussed two well-publicized cleanup raids on Bishop’s Tap Room, one in 1947 and another in 1951, which were part of a larger liquor raid on various downtown

establishments.¹ Another raid previously discussed, at the Hi-Lite Club, started after a band of teenagers attacked a gay man leaving the club early one morning. The owner defended the patron, but fired a pistol into the crowd and wounded a young man.² This corresponds to a familiar pattern in Oklahoma City police campaigns against gay men until the late 1950s. As long as queer residents kept a lower profile, and stayed out of trouble, the police left them alone by and large. On both Bishop's raids mentioned above the bar was raided as part of a larger, politically-motivated crackdown on illegal liquor sales, not to harass gay men. Most of the men arrested during the two raids avoided charges, which suggests that police hassled gay and bisexual men at the tap room, but not any more than they did patrons in the other clubs raided that night. If not for the shooting incident, the Hi-Lite Club would likely have continued to operate. After all, the Oklahoma City police knew that gay men frequented the club, but they only bothered to shut it down once a young man was injured. In most cases the police enforced liquor and curfew laws, but it is telling that several well-known nightspots that openly catered to a gay and bisexual clientele received no more harassment than other bars in Oklahoma City, which suggests that gay and bisexual men enjoyed a relatively high level of freedom in public in the 1940s and 1950s.

Times slowly changed for queer men throughout the 1950s, however, as national events and hysteria trickled down to Oklahoma City. As the Cold War and international relations made the American mission and presence abroad more urgent, Americans prized

¹ "Police Grab 78 in City Tavern Clean-up Drive," *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/27/1947, 22; "Weekend Raids Bring \$1,360," *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/28/1947, 2; "City Vice Raid Nets 46 Persons," *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/12/1951, 35.

² "Youth Is Shot In Club Fight," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/24/1950, 1; *The Oklahoma City Times*, 7/24/1950, 3.

conformity, uniformity, and solidarity at home more than ever before. The McCarthy hearings in Washington attempted to blacklist anybody who failed to live and vote with appropriate American-ness, and issues like crime, juvenile delinquency, drug use, prostitution, homosexuality, and other so-called deviant behaviors came under increasing attack. In this environment, a redefinition of roles and relationships within the family occurred, and women often lost out in that realignment. Indeed, the very essence of American masculinity was on trial, subjectively and literally, so any behavior not considered masculine and forceful, in an old-school sense, aroused suspicion.³

Residents in Oklahoma City had lamented the growth of juvenile delinquency since the 1940s, arguing that unruly teenagers later turned into incorrigible adult criminals. “Child Delinquency Is a Social Blight” warned one typical headline, and everyone from Police Chief L.J. Hilbert to Oklahoma City FBI agents intervened to curb teenagers roaming the streets, an increase in petty theft, and drunkenness.⁴ Popular *Daily Oklahoman* columnist and moralist Edith Johnson wrote several opinion pieces that

³ The literature on these issues is massive, but some of the best include Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996); David Cate, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge Under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978); M.J. Heale, *McCarthy's Americans: Red Scare Politics in State and Nation, 1935-1965* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Robert D. Dean, *Imperial Brotherhood: Gender and the Making of Cold War Foreign Policy* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001); K.A. Cuordileone, “‘Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960,” *Journal of American History* (September 2000): 522-525.

⁴ *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/15/1944, 12; “Police Dust Off Curfew in City,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/22/1945, 2; “Crime Wave Here, FBI Agent Says,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/16/1947, 20.

warned residents against permissive parenting practices and allowing children to run with the wrong crowd.⁵

Against this backdrop of simmering community anxiety came two articles that appeared in national magazines, both of which generated long-range changes in the Oklahoma City police department and the gay male subculture. The first was in *Look* magazine in February of 1952. Calling Oklahoma City one of the ten worst vice spots in the country -- a hotbed of "organized vice and prostitution openly operating with bought-and-paid-for connivance of the local officials...threatening an entire generation with disease and disgrace" -- the article was a black eye not only on the city but the police force.⁶ The article outraged citizens, dredging up feelings of inadequacy and backwardness that had plagued residents for decades.⁷ The focus of community outrage

⁵ Bob L. Blackburn, *Heart of the Promised Land: Oklahoma County, An Illustrated History* (Woodland Hills, California: Windsor Publications, 1982), 141. "Miss Edith" Johnson was a mainstay at the *Daily Oklahoman* from her first appointment as a food critic in 1908. For the next 50 years, Johnson offered readers a common sense approach to life and morality. By 1918, she was part of the editorial staff with her own column. Johnson received national syndication by 1920 and was considered one of the United States' pioneer female journalists. She authored many articles that dealt with the consequences of lax parenting in the 1940s and 1950s at the height of Oklahoma City's so-called delinquency crisis. One stated that girls were more emotional than boys and more likely to be homosexual, especially if they were incarcerated. See "When Girls Are Wilder Than Boys of Like Age," *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/30/1943, 6, "Why Are Sex Perverts Allowed to Run Amuck?," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/10/1946, 6.

⁶ *Look*, February 1952.

⁷ The ultimate source of embarrassment and self-loathing via literature was John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which many Oklahomans felt portrayed them as dirty, ignorant, shiftless deadbeats, despite the rather poignant image of resiliency that Steinbeck lent to most of the characters. Angie Debo writes of the "abnormal sensitiveness" Oklahomans exhibit to how others perceive them in *Foot-Loose and Fancy-Free* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949, 1989); The literature on Oklahoma's image, both self-perceived and other-perceived, is surprisingly strong. See Tommy R. Thompson, "Milk and Honey and A Few Bad Apples: The Image of

landed squarely on the shoulders of Police Chief Lawrence J. “Smokey” Hilbert, whose tenure from 1943 to 1954 was mired in controversy. Smokey had a rather cavalier attitude in regard to enforcement of vice laws. During the last two years of his tenure, Hilbert dealt with allegations of bribery against high-ranking detectives, payoffs by local tavern owners demanded by beat cops walking the eastern wards, the *Look* allegations, and charges of voter improprieties in the 1952 Oklahoma City elections. A grand jury investigated the charges of voting fraud and corruption in October of 1953, and panelists recommended sweeping changes to the police department. As a direct result of the *Look* article and Hilbert’s troubles, city officials reorganized the vice squad and took it out from under the direct control of the police chief. Officers rotated in and out of the unit every six months so as to discourage systemic corruption and prevent burnout.⁸

Just as the Oklahoma City metropolitan residents thought that the reforms were bringing vice under control, the national media once again placed a white-hot spotlight on the city. In January of 1955, the *Saturday Evening Post* ran the first of five articles dealing with juvenile delinquency in certain United States’ cities, one of which was Oklahoma City. Written by Richard Clendenen and Herbert Beaser, both members of a Senate judiciary subcommittee that investigated juvenile delinquency, the article alleged

Oklahoma in Popular Magazines.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 68 (1990): 276-295; Jack Spears, “Hollywood’s Oklahoma.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 67 (1989), 340-381; Alvin O. Turner, “Vanity, Vanity Thy Name is History.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 63 (1985): 148-165.

⁸ Ronald J. Owens, *Oklahoma Justice: The Oklahoma City Police: A Century of Gunfighters, Gangsters, and Terrorists* (Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing Company, 1995), 148, 152-163. A retired Oklahoma City police officer, Owens is fair and his work is extremely informative and surprisingly candid regarding the failings of the department. Officers rotating in and out of the vice squad was a short-lived reform however, as later officers like Ken “Sugar” Smith made a career in vice.

that Oklahoma City was teeming with teenage prostitutes and drug addicts, homosexuals, abortionists, and other nefarious characters. In addition, local law enforcement was portrayed as lax and corrupt.⁹

The primary source for the *Post* article was Robert Cunningham, a state legislator from Oklahoma County, who testified before the Senate subcommittee directed by Clendenen and Beaser. Cunningham testified in late 1953, almost fourteen months before the *Post* article appeared, and the *Daily Oklahoman* summarized his testimony in an article shortly after. Cunningham told Congress that before authorities sprang to action, Oklahoma City was crawling with juvenile delinquents, and that their behavior rapidly escalated to more serious offenses. After a five-month investigation, Cunningham reported that teenage sex orgies, some of them homosexual, occurred right under the noses of authorities in apartments rented by teenagers. In addition, over 250 teenage drug addicts were using barbiturates and other prescription drugs made available to them by incompetent pharmacists and quack physicians. Cunningham lauded the round-the-clock police attempts to curb the problems, and the modest success that the campaign enjoyed, but he argued that poor pay scales and little help from federal officials prevented a more thorough cleanup.¹⁰

The problem, unfortunately, was that both Beaser and Clendenen selectively quoted from Cunningham's testimony when crafting the *Post* article, and the article appeared even before the subcommittee's final report became public. This ultimately led

⁹ *Saturday Evening Post*, 227, no. 29 (January 1955): 32-33, and 70-73. This series of five articles dealing with juvenile delinquency in the U.S. ran on Jan 8, Jan 15, Jan 22, Jan 29, and Feb 5, 1955. Oklahoma City was featured in the Jan 15th issue.

¹⁰ "Cunningham Stars in Teen-Age Quiz," *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/25/1953, 1.

to their resignation from the subcommittee. Robert Cunningham also acknowledged that he exaggerated many of his figures and he received compensation for advising the authors. According to police chief Roy Bergman, the 250 teenage drug addicts supposedly roaming the streets in Oklahoma City were actually the sum total of all drug addicts – of all ages -- found statewide during the investigation. Bergman noted that the sex orgies and rampant homosexuality were actually limited to one heterosexual sex party involving young adults and a single incident of a homosexual party, involving four African-American residents from the east side Oklahoma City.¹¹

The fallout from the *Look* and *Saturday Evening Post* articles was tremendous. Not only was the vice squad reorganized and encouraged to actively pursue wrongdoing, but city leaders gave them more money and manpower with which to wage war.¹² Some complained that the new vice squad enforced the law too well. By late 1954, illegal liquor seizures increased almost seventy percent, arrests for gambling shot up fourfold, and enforcement statistics in every other category were climbing. In 1956, new police Chief Roy Bergman asked for and received the largest budgetary increase in Oklahoma City history -- over \$160,000 -- to establish a mobile crime squad replete with new cars and increased manpower. The squad would work on “problem areas,” everything from traffic duty to vice.¹³

¹¹ “Cunningham’s Teen Sin Story Blasted,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/11/1955, 1; “Teen Sin Story Authors Resign,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/10/1955, 1. It is interesting that Bergman made sure to state that the homosexual party involved several black residents.

¹² “More City Vice Officers Asked in Police Budget,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/9/1953, 33; “Law on Perversion Called Inadequate,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/13/1952, 2.

¹³ Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 164-168.

The gay community felt the sting of enhanced police determination following the controversy very quickly. Closer examinations and undercover operations against downtown establishments increased. In what was hardly a coincidental move, the police chief ordered raids on all downtown taprooms and pool halls, where officers checked patrons and evaluated the general appearance and cleanliness of the establishments. In a three-day campaign launched in February of 1952, Oklahoma City police officers and Oklahoma County sheriffs' deputies visited the 18 Club, Louie's 29 Club, and a host of other Oklahoma County establishments, legitimate and otherwise. Over forty people went to jail. Officers checked identifications, arrested people for vagrancy and drunkenness and selling beer to minors, and city officers made it clear to patrons in establishments along Grand Avenue that they would be back.¹⁴ When the police failed to arrest bar patrons for liquor violations, they went after the entertainments that bars provided. In 1956, police rounded up a group of Oklahoma City residents and charged them with producing and selling lewd photographs. All of the photos were of young men, ages seventeen to thirty-one, most of whom were weight lifters or athletes. The photos were "sold in downtown bars in packages of 10," a description that strongly suggests that the photos were targeted for gay men.¹⁵

Just at the juncture when the police pursued vice in a more strident fashion, they received help in searching out sex deviates from the medical community in Oklahoma. The psychological parameters of sexual orientation had been a popular topic for the psychoanalytical profession since the turn of twentieth century. Estelle Freedman argues

¹⁴ "Police Call on Taverns with Paddy Wagon," *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/23/1952, 1; "Taverns Outside City's Limits Get Visits, Too," *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/24/1952, 1.

¹⁵ "Lewd Picture Charge Filed," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/31/1956, 3.

that in the debates over how to treat sexual “psychopaths,” as the medical community labeled practitioners of non-normative sexuality, a strict demarcation between heterosexuality and homosexuality developed. Protecting society from aggressive male sexual desire and perversion supplanted the need to preserve female virtue. Community leaders criminalized alternative sexualities by equating homosexual men with child molesters and homosexual recruiters. The male homosexual, always nefarious, was considered more dangerous than ever before.¹⁶

World War II initiated new debates on the topic, although it is doubtful that the new conception meant better things for many same-sex lovers. The seemingly large numbers of homosexuals and the growth of homosexual subcultures after the war encouraged scholars to approach the “problem” from a new angle, a social science perspective, from what might be called an industrial standpoint. Under this industrial theory, family dynamics were less important than external issues associated with the Depression, World War II, and nuclear technology in leading many men into a “flight from masculinity” and an embrace of homosexuality. Scientists still considered homosexuals deviant in the strictest sense, but they no longer considered that deviance a disorganized social adaptation. Scholars approached homosexuality as an alternative psycho-social organization, a unique subculture, replete with norms that did not mirror

¹⁶ Estelle Freedman, “‘Uncontrolled Desires’: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960,” *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987): pp. 100-104. Another ironic result of the debates over the proper expression of sexuality was that it led to the discussion and legitimization of sexual practices, such as oral and anal sex, between consenting heterosexual adults. In general, the debates demystified certain sexual practices and brought them out for discussion, which was unparalleled and liberating for some.

those held by society at large. Thus, “deviance” might simply be an alternative set of social expectations instead of a pathological and inherently dangerous maladjustment.¹⁷

Unfortunately, either approach was fraught with difficulties for gay and bisexual men. If authorities viewed homosexuality as a psychopathic disorder, it conflated same-sex activity with violent acts like rape or assault. In that case, homosexuals were predatory and in need of a harsh response. If one viewed same-sex activity as simply a different orientation of sexual and social norms, it was easier to see sexual orientation as a choice, a choice that might be altered if society applied the right amount of pressure. Both perspectives found their way into the discussions by medical authorities in Oklahoma City. The attitudes of medical professionals, both native Oklahomans and national experts, legitimized the treatment of non-normative sexuality as something to be feared and curtailed.

Oklahomans had followed the national debates over homosexuals in the federal government from the early 1950s, however the removal of civil servants in Washington, D.C. would likely have been a remote issue to the average Oklahoma City resident, as vice, police corruption, and juvenile delinquency were urgent problems. Edith Johnson discussed homosexuality in her columns occasionally, but it remained incidental to her larger arguments regarding parental responsibility and individual initiative. In several opinion pieces that appeared in the *Daily Oklahoman* in the 1940s, Johnson argued that

¹⁷ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 140-143; Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999), 54-58. Bailey, in her study of Lawrence, Kansas, found that the new social scientific approach to categorizing and studying homosexuality remained “enmeshed” in the older moralistic approach. In fact, the newer approaches were often used to support the older claims.

poor parental control and a general lack of ambition lead to juvenile delinquency, and occasionally, homosexuality. She also lamented the lack of treatment options for pedophiles, as imprisoning them for short periods without treatment only exacerbated their condition.¹⁸

By the mid-1950s, the response to adult same-sex behavior from high-ranking medical professionals in Oklahoma was more overt, and their opinions likely contributed to the misery felt by LGBT residents at the hands of the police and moral authorities. At a seminar for homicide investigators held in Oklahoma City in 1956, Oklahoma state mental health director Dr. Hayden Donahue told officers that sex deviance -- he apparently lumped all manner of sexual crimes like rape and incest into the same category as homosexuality -- was on the increase in Europe and the United States, especially among "learned people such as college students and businessmen." In an odd counter-logical vein, Donahue related that although homosexuality caused the ruin of many great empires, and "homosexualists" killed their "victims" from time to time, they were not generally prone to criminal behavior. Donahue called for changes in sex crime laws, as treatment for passive homosexuals was preferable to incarceration.¹⁹ Given his description of homosexual-induced crumbling empires and murderous homosexual

¹⁸ Several articles by Edith Johnson spoke about the dangers posed by unruly teenagers. Homosexuality, especially among girls, was a consequence of permissive parenting practices. She also cautioned residents to be on the lookout for sex criminals -- which she defined almost exclusively as pedophiles or men who raped adult women. She found women partially to blame for wearing sexually arousing clothing. See "When Girls Are Wilder Than Boys of Like Age," *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/30/1943, 6; "Why Are Sex Perverts Allowed to Run Amuck?," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/10/1946, 6; "How Shall We Treat Our Sex Criminals?" *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/25/1946, 12; "Sex Criminals Face the Law." *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/18/1950, 14.

¹⁹ "Sex Deviation on Increase," *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/17/1956, 28.

predators, it is doubtful that Donahue's plea to create a treatment system for gay and bisexual men was given much consideration.

Donahue's words and those of other medical professionals inspired moralists to harp on the "disease factor" for their own ends. Local columnist Edith Johnson echoed that thinking in a column she authored in 1957. Using the letter of a 24-year-old "former deviate" who was now married with children and calling for treatment for homosexuals, Johnson discussed whether homosexuality was a sin or an illness. She reminded readers in every paragraph that prominent historical figures who practiced deviation, and the civilizations that deemed it acceptable like the Roman and Greek, were now dead. Bringing the Bible into the discussion, Johnson argued that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah because of rampant homosexuality, and the same thing might happen in the United States:

Judging by all signs and portents the practice of deviation which is expressed in more than 30 ways, is growing among us...As it seems to increase in our own country there arises a fear that it may seriously affect the integrity and strength of the nation, weakening it morally and then politically. Whether it be sin or disease it remains 'an abomination before the Lord.'"

Despite her complete lack of medical or psychological training, Johnson reasoned that the prospects for rehabilitation were slim because homosexuals were anti-social, guilt-ridden, self-loathing people who eschew change: "it is an affliction much harder to cure than alcoholism. Few deviates, in all likelihood, would be willing to join a (therapy) group lest their identity become known."²⁰

²⁰ "Deviation... Sin, Illness?" *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/31/1957, 10.

The comments by Donahue and Johnson mirrored a growing trend in how Oklahoma City residents treated same-sex activity. In categorizing homosexuality as sex deviation, a deviation just as prevalent and feared as serial sex crimes and rape, Donahue indirectly encouraged the police to equate consensual homosexuality with such serious crimes. Donahue reinforced that notion by arguing “such perversion can be cured if the victim is sincere and willing...like alcoholism, the person must have a great desire before a psychiatrist can do him or her any good.” By arguing that homosexuality was a psychosocial maladjustment that could be cured if the offenders had the proper motivation, the medical community reinforced the idea that homosexuality was a lifestyle choice, that gay men could and should be heterosexual but chose otherwise. Johnson argued that point more forcefully. For her, it was a sin, the title of her article and the intent of the young man’s letter aside, and it threatened the stability of her country. Her voice carried a huge weight in the state of Oklahoma and nationally in her syndicated column.

Words by Donahue and Johnson likely made the police, legal authorities, civil authorities, and the Oklahoma City community less tolerant of homosexuality than was already the case, and perhaps inspired citizens to be more aware of same-sex activity in their neighborhoods. In fact, everyday citizens played a significant role in policing their communities in the 1950s. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the sodomy case of Oklahoma City resident Wilburn Berryman. One hot August evening in 1953, S.C. Killman was out for an after-dinner walk when he came upon a car parked in the alley behind his residence. Killman knew the car belonged to his neighbor, Berryman, so he did not find anything unusual about its location at first. As he got closer, Killman

realized that a young man was sitting in the car. He believed that the youth was trying to steal Berryman's car, so he quietly investigated. When he came alongside, Killman observed his neighbor Berryman performing a sex act on another young man in the back seat. He immediately reported his observations to Oklahoma City police detectives, who then arrested Berryman.²¹

As more details about the case emerged, Berryman's difficulties magnified. Both of the boys were minors – J.L. was fifteen and J.J. was sixteen – and both worked for him moving heavy items and performing other odd jobs. The young men reported that Berryman had performed fellatio on them, together and separately, for several months. Prosecutor Granville Scanland painted Berryman, a married traveling salesman, as being even worse than a pedophile in that he essentially blackmailed the desperate boys by making their employment contingent upon sex with him. J.L. testified at Berryman's trial, and he probably made things worse for the accused. Particularly damning was the admission by one of the boys that had Killman not discovered them, the activity would have continued unabated. Only fifteen, J.L. was terrified by the whole concept of a trial, and apparently he was reticent to condemn Berryman, a man that gave him a job and money. The shame of publicly admitting what Berryman did to him – and acknowledging that it was possible that they liked it -- would also have been humiliating. "I would have said anything to get out of that chair," he later related. Berryman denied

²¹ State v. (William) Wilburn Alfred Berryman, case #22102 and #22103, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals, Berryman v. State, 1955 OK CR 51, case #A-12122, decided 4/13/1955.

the charges, but admitted under cross-examination that he received a dishonorable discharge from the service after being convicted of sodomy.²²

Despite these admissions, Berryman struggled to mount a credible defense, which became complicated when questions regarding his sanity arose during the trial. Shortly after prosecutors filed sodomy charges against him, Berryman was committed to the Eastern State Hospital in Vinita, Oklahoma, possibly due to a mental illness or stress. Doctors released him on November 6, 1953, and declared him sane, but Berryman protested and demanded a sanity hearing before his trial could recommence. It is possible that Berryman was using the medical establishment to his advantage, for if he could convince the court that he was impaired, his sentence would likely be reduced, or he might be sentenced to a treatment facility instead of prison. In February of 1954, Dr. F.M. Adams, the medical superintendent of Eastern State Mental Hospital, reiterated his physicians' diagnosis, but admitted that Berryman suffered from "an aberration in relation to his will power," one that could not be cured. A Dr. Katis, a psychology professor at the University of Oklahoma, testified at the sanity hearing that Berryman suffered from a "mental aberration...he has certain impulses which we have all learned to master but are not controllable as far as he is concerned." Using this testimony, Berryman's attorney Sid White argued that he should, if convicted, receive a sentence to an appropriate medical facility for treatment instead of incarceration in the penitentiary. However, Scanland asked both men, upon cross examination, whether Berryman could

²² Ibid. Included in the case file is a letter from J.L. to the Oklahoma Court of Criminal Appeals in which the young man, then a military recruit serving in Maine, expressed disbelief that Berryman was still in jail. He also implied that prosecutors led his testimony by capitalizing on his fear of the whole trial process.

distinguish between right and wrong. Both testified that he could. The jury and Judge William Fogg ruled Berryman sane and his sodomy trial resumed. On February 23, 1954, Judge Fogg found Berryman guilty and two weeks later sentenced him to five years in prison at McAlester.

Berryman appealed but received little sympathy from legal authorities. All three of the judges on the Criminal Appeals Court agreed that Berryman received a fair trial, according to the letter of the law, and knew right from wrong. Because the state legislature did not provide a medical treatment option for those deemed guilty of sodomy, Berryman received the standard sentence for men convicted of sodomy with minors. Judge Powell offered on rehearing that Berryman likely needed the services of a psychiatrist if true rehabilitation was to occur, and that incarcerating him with a bunch of other men made little sense:

The argument that the...purpose of the law is to act as a deterrent rather than punishment for punishment's sake, and that the real purpose of the law is in fact circumvented when a person with the record of the within defendant is placed in penitentiary among young boys and persons not sexually perverted and thus given opportunity to follow a compelling urge to prey on such persons, is not without merit. It is said that perverts are not isolated at the Oklahoma State Penitentiary, and that there is no provision to afford them required medical treatment...In this case I would reduce the sentence from five years to four years to forcefully call attention to the duty of the State to attempt the rehabilitation of sex perverts in view of the demoralization and moral decay brought about by such persons and where the condition with which they may be afflicted is by many becoming recognized as a form of mental disease.²³

Berryman's case was not the only one in which medical authorities played a significant role in determining the outcome. In 1949, Robert Forest Ervin faced three counts of crime against nature for having oral and anal sex with two young boys, both

²³ Berryman v. State, 1955 OK CR 51, Case #A-12122, concurring opinion by Judge Powell.

under fifteen, which could easily have merited a thirty-year sentence under Oklahoma law. At the time, Ervin was a thirty-four-year-old drifter who lived in his 1936 Dodge truck along the South Canadian River near Reno Avenue. Ervin never received more than a rudimentary mental evaluation by the court, but by all accounts he was considered mentally challenged. Under a plea agreement reached with Oklahoma County Attorney R.B. Halloway, the state would drop two of the three charges against Ervin if he agreed to allow prison officials to castrate him. Ervin would also receive credit for fifty-nine days in jail waiting trial, and prosecutors would recommend immediate parole. Ervin accepted the plea bargain, changed his plea to guilty, and received a ten-year sentence from Judge Baker Melone.²⁴

Controlling the sexual and reproductive habits of American citizens – by political, social hygiene, and religious authorities -- was hardly a new concept by the 1950s. The poor, the unwed, immigrants, and ethnic minorities were much more likely to face unwanted sterilization, especially if they were charged with a crime. One of the hallmarks of Progressive-era eugenicists, sterilization was seen as a good, natural way to weed out undesirable elements from the American gene pool. At least thirty-three states had laws which governed state-mandated sterilizations in the 20th-century, including Oklahoma.²⁵ Castration for rapists had been the subject of much debate in the medical

²⁴ State v. Robert Forest Ervin, Case #18805, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; *Ex Parte Ervin*, 1954 OK CR 16, Case #A-12016, decided 2/23/1954.

²⁵ D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 255; Alexandra Minna Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 2-17. Stern shows that forced sterilizations occurred rather frequently in the western United States, and although the numbers crested between 1935-1945, the practice was still an accepted means to police blacks and immigrants well into the 1960s; Rickie Solinger discusses the racial, political, and class-

community since the 1930s, as at that juncture the threat to American culture and the family became identified with male failings instead of female degeneracy. This encouraged authorities to emplace more drastic measures to curtail “sexual psychopaths,” but castration was rarely advocated for homosexual men.²⁶ In Ervin’s case, with his diminished mental capacity, it seemed like a reasonable and medically-sanctioned way for Oklahoma County authorities to be rid of him. Ervin underwent castration while at McAlester, but not before languishing 202 days in the Oklahoma County jail awaiting transfer to the penitentiary. For the next five years, he failed to receive parole, even though prominent figures associated with his case sent letters of recommendation, such as Oklahoma County Attorney Granville Scanland, Judge Baker Melone, and former assistant county attorney Russell Halloway, the man who essentially conned Ervin into accepting the plea agreement. The Oklahoma Criminal Court of Appeals rejected his 1954 appeal as well, correctly citing a lack of jurisdiction, but by then Ervin was almost ready for release on credit for good behavior. He served almost an entire year in prison while waiting for trial or to be transported to serve his sentence. That, coupled with his lack of counsel and agreement to be castrated, inspired a scathing opinion from Judge Powell:

based parameters of sterilization in the United States in *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproduction Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), and *Abortion Wars: A Half-Century of Struggle, 1950-2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 27, 141-146.

²⁶ Neil Miller, *Sex Crime Panic: A Journey to the Paranoid Heart of the 1950s* (New York: Alyson Books, 2002), 158. According to Miller, medical officials only half-heartedly discussed castrating those men arrested during the Sioux Falls raids of the 1950s; Estelle Freedman, “‘Uncontrolled Desires’: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960,” *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987), 96-98.

This court under the circumstances in this case is not disposed to charge to the defendant the latches of the officials. He had agreed to undergo an operation that few persons with average intelligence would normally agree to. His sexual predilection or condition, an abnormal and detestable one, could only be accounted for by reason of some mental quirk. If this court had the authority, the writ (for release) would be granted, because no matter how guilty a person may be who is charged with or convicted of crime, he is entitled to fair, honest and conscientious treatment by the officers and the courts. By reason of the apparent oversight, the petitioner was kept in jail an unreasonable time after sentence before he was transported to the State Penitentiary. He has not received fair treatment...A person in his mental state without counsel should not be expected to take advantage of the measures that a normal person would.²⁷

As the Berryman and Ervin cases suggest, the evolving medical opinions then circulating about homosexuals and their “disorder” played significant roles in the prosecution and incarceration of gay and bisexual residents, just as they did nationally.²⁸ Berryman, unlike most men convicted of sodomy in Oklahoma County for the previous thirty odd years, served his entire sentence, despite letters of support from J.L. and prison officials. To be sure, his sexual relationship with two teenaged boys – even though the contact apparently was consensual – possibly made it more expedient and politically-advantageous to punish Berryman. However, Berryman was not the first adult male convicted of having inappropriate homosexual contact with a minor in Oklahoma County

²⁷ State v. Robert Forest Ervin, Case #18805, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; *Ex Parte Ervin*, 1954 OK CR 16, Case #A-12016, decided 2/23/1954.

²⁸ Estelle Freedman, “‘Uncontrolled Desires’: The Response to the Sexual Psychopath, 1920-1960,” *Journal of American History* 74 (June 1987). 83-86. Freedman provides an outline of the sex-crime panics that started in the 1930s, waned during World War II, and reappeared during the Cold War. It was usually at the local level where attempts to eradicate the sexual psychopath, post-1930, wrought significant changes in attitudes regarding non-procreative married sex as well as homosexuality. The paranoia over “psychopaths” ironically liberated heterosexuals to try many of the behaviors for which authorities chastised same-sex lovers.

and yet he served one of the longest sentences.²⁹ Ervin agreed to castration as a means to significantly reduce his prison sentence at the request of the county attorney, who received spurious medical advice regarding the effectiveness of castration on repeat sexual offenses. Physicians, some of whom had little training in the treatment of the psychological aspects of sexual issues, had much to say about whether residents were pathological, received parole, or were even entitled to counsel during criminal trials. Local law enforcement agencies received much of their training about “sex perverts” from these experts, so their words went a long way in defining the boundaries of acceptable sexuality and how it was expressed in Oklahoma City for years.

Armed with the tools and perspective to pursue vice, the Oklahoma City police did so on a more consistent basis. As a direct result of the Oklahoma City police vice squad’s reorganization, officers were free to more stringently police the gay and bisexual male community. Perhaps the most obvious example of how tolerance for homosexuality lessened in Oklahoma City was the undercover sting operation conducted by the city police at Lincoln Park Zoo in 1957. As was noted in chapter three, public restrooms, or tearooms, were very popular places for queer men to have anonymous sexual encounters. The police received a number of complaints from zoo patrons that the restroom was a significant congregation point for gay men, and so on the weekend of November 22-24, 1957, vice detectives working in conjunction with zoo officials set up a

²⁹ See appendix B for a sentence comparison. It was not unusual for men convicted of sodomy with underage girls and boys to receive longer sentences than Berryman – some even ten years in length – but many of the defendants served only one to three years of the sentence. Some defendants guilty of sex with minors received very short sentences – one year or less in some instances.

clandestine trap in the men's restroom. That weekend, the squad arrested eleven men and took them downtown for questioning.³⁰

Lincoln Park was the largest and most heavily trafficked park in Oklahoma City. Acquired in 1909 and located at Northeast 36th Street and Lincoln Boulevard, Lincoln Park encompassed over 635 total acres, forty of which included significant improvements. Lincoln Park offered city residents a wide range of amusements and leisure activities, as playgrounds, ball fields, horseback riding, swimming, and tennis courts were available. In addition, it was the only park in Oklahoma City that offered patrons a bathhouse and a zoo on grounds. As a result, Lincoln Park was a very popular place for city residents of all races, creeds, and sexual appetites, and it was so heavily visited that the Oklahoma City police department gave the area its own patrol.³¹

As to the 1957 crackdown, the arrests at Lincoln Park Zoo went down much like other vice sting operations in the 1950s.³² Detectives drilled a small peep hole in the ceiling and wired a buzzer alarm to a common area located in the back, where officers waited to arrest offenders. When groups of men entered the restroom together, detectives monitored their behavior and responded accordingly. Arrest records for four

³⁰ *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/26/1957, 30. Ten suspects were arrested that weekend, and another man on the following Monday.

³¹ Oklahoma City Planning Commission, "A Preliminary Report on Schools and Parks for Oklahoma City, Oklahoma." (April 1949), Table 6, found at Edmon Low Library, Oklahoma State University, call number M396OK5 P25 p924.

³² See David Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), and Neil Miller, *Sex Crime Panic: A Journey to the Paranoid Heart of the 1950s* (New York: Alyson Books, 2002) for a discussion of surveillance tactics and evidentiary issues associated with undercover sting operations.

of the eleven suspects apprehended that weekend indicated that men performed fellatio on each other through “glory holes”³³ drilled in the stall walls. One subject, forty-eight-year-old Duard Wilson Graves, “took his false teeth out of his mouth placing them in his right shirt pocket...(he) massaged the other subject’s penis two or three times and stuck it into his mouth.” The other party involved was fifty-four-year-old Richard Webster who readily admitted his participation in the act. Graves, however, initially resisted the officers’ suggestion that he was a “pervert” and threatened to sue anybody involved in the sting. According to the police report, Graves eventually “admitted he was a pervert, that he had recently become one, and that this was his first offense. Admitted that he had taken part in the above mentioned act.”³⁴

Prosecutors charged eight of those arrested in the sting with the customary disorderly conduct, and all of the men posted the customary \$20 bond and never returned for their date in police court. Police Captain Worthy singled out four of those arrested -- Graves, Webster, Morris Smoot, and Earl Knocke -- to face felony sodomy charges in state court.³⁵ Why authorities chose these four men remains unclear. Possibly, the early confessions by Graves and Webster made the felony case easier to sustain, and Graves’s bombast and threats would have won him little support at headquarters. Of the eleven

³³ A glory hole is a hole, usually 2-8 inches in diameter, drilled between restroom stalls through which people perform sex acts on one another.

³⁴ Quotes from detectives taken from Police Department Investigation Report, Oklahoma City Police, case number 54006 and 54007, B.R. number 84097 and 84098, 11/23/1957. Hereafter cited as “OKC Police Reports” with appropriate case references.

³⁵ Ibid. Graves and Webster were released to the Oklahoma County Sheriff’s Office on warrants charging crime against nature. Police reports for others arrested no longer exist according to clerks at the city police station. Supposedly, they only saved these four!

arrested that weekend, at least five were married, and the four charged with felonies were not, so perhaps the authorities viewed the married suspects' involvement in the sex acts as a one-time indiscretion. Some of those arrested were professionals -- a professor, a barber, and several business owners -- and perhaps that prevented the scandal from growing, although historically the higher-profile person arrested in such situations suffered more. Duard Graves, an unmarried truck driver, alleged that the police coerced the confession out of him with a disingenuous promise that if he pled guilty in city court he would only receive a \$20 fine. As Graves told Dal McEntire of *One* magazine, a popular national gay publication, "I made the admission only to keep the slander off my family and to preserve my reputation." However, Oklahoma County Attorney Charles Gregory tried Graves and Webster together on the sodomy charges on December 20, 1957, less than one month after their arrest, and the jury returned a guilty verdict. Oddly enough, Graves and Webster received only a two-year suspended sentence, something that suggests the timing of the sting and trial -- over the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays -- to say nothing of the coerced confessions, probably jeopardized the legitimacy of any harsh sentences.³⁶

Despite the myriad of unknown details surrounding this major sting operation, one fact emerges: all of these men suffered public humiliation due to their arrest. The *Daily Oklahoman* ran the names, ages, and addresses of all of those arrested, regardless of whether prosecutors charged them with a crime. Some of the men were married, were professionals, or held other high-profile positions in the community. The Gaylord

³⁶ "Tangents: News and Views," *One*, February 1958, 18; State v. Richard Webster and Duard Graves, case #24802, 13th District Court, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, 12/20/1957. Many details about the case are unknown, as the trial transcripts no longer exist in the file jacket, and the district attorney's office refused to release their copy.

family, or more specifically its patriarch Edward K. Gaylord, apparently took an active interest in moral issues facing Oklahoma. In addition to publicizing the names of those arrested on a variety of vice charges, Gaylord once pressured University of Oklahoma President Joseph Brandt in 1942 after receiving an anonymous letter from the mother of a fraternity pledge. According to the letter, the fraternity members forced her son to participate in rush activities in the nude, masturbate in front of upperclassmen, and engage in sodomy. He was also taken to the Biltmore Hotel and coerced into having sex with a prostitute. Gaylord brazenly told Brandt that “we could set our reporters and other investigators to work and bring out a story that would rock the University to its foundations. I believe that such action might do untold harm to the institution...Mere denouncements or threats will not cure the situation...I am leaving the matter in your hands because I believe that you will act decisively to purge the University of obscene orgies.”³⁷

Although the *Daily Oklahoman* could alter the trajectory of socialization and sexual practices enjoyed by gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City, the change in emphasis authorities used to police the gay male world proved more significant, and the end of prohibition in Oklahoma in 1959 was of central importance. Prohibition had been a powerful and seemingly intractable issue when the Twin Territories applied for statehood. Many felt that given Indian Territory’s large Native American population, prohibition for the entire state was the only logical way to keep liquor away from people allegedly prone to alcoholism. The Enabling Act mandated that Indian Territory be dry, but technically Oklahoma Territory could still legally allow alcohol. Wet and dry forces

³⁷ E.K. Gaylord to Joseph Brandt, 10/14/1942. University of Oklahoma, Joseph Brandt Collection, Western History Collections, Box 3, folder 19.

clashed heavily while the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention was in session. Wets argued that free enterprise could not be impeded and that morality could not be controlled or legislated. Drys harped on the obvious conundrum -- keeping one section of Oklahoma dry and allowing another section to sell alcohol essentially made the whole state wet, something that jeopardized the statehood process. Federal authorities refused to budge, and both sides wanted statehood more than anything, so the issue was effectively settled. Oklahoma entered the union in 1907 as a dry state.³⁸

This did not mean that liquor was hard to find in Oklahoma. For years, authorities struggled and failed to control the flow of illegal alcohol in Oklahoma City, and Oklahoma in general. By the 1910s, over 1000 bootleggers and runners operated in open disguise in Oklahoma City, many of whom worked for infamous liquor peddler William Creekmore.³⁹ Understaffed police authorities fought against a population that generally liked to drink once in a while, and a healthy number of bars and saloons operated in Oklahoma City, from its founding and well into the 1930s. Barely a week went by when the *Daily Oklahoman* failed to run stories that detailed liquor raids, complete with the number of pints seized, only to see the same people arrested the very next week. Policing the sale and distribution of liquor was very draining for the police, and rumors of police corruption and payoffs were common---and highly likely, given the low pay that many beat officers and detectives received.⁴⁰

³⁸ Jimmie Lewis Franklin, *Born Sober: Prohibition in Oklahoma, 1907-1959* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 17-25; James Ralph Scales and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982).

³⁹ Franklin, *Born Sober*, 43-44.

⁴⁰ A recent and very detailed account of the social costs and failures of prohibition in Oklahoma is James Edward Klein, "A Social History of Prohibition in Oklahoma, 1900-

With the end of national prohibition in 1933, the situation only got worse in Oklahoma City. Wets in Oklahoma used the passage of the 21st Amendment to legalize the sale of 3.2 percent beer, for even though prohibition ended nationally in 1933 Oklahoma was constitutionally mandated to remain dry. As a result, bars and taverns enjoyed a renaissance in Oklahoma City, a development that created another headache for authorities: enforcement of prohibition in a state where “non-intoxicating” beer was sold. It was a losing proposition from the beginning. “Any decent nightclub and restaurant in Oklahoma City had velvet bags under the table to hold your bottle of booze,” remembers Jim Fortenberry.⁴¹

The sheer number of taverns meant that before 1959, beat officers stuck their heads into a bar and hauled off the obviously drunk, but they rarely made wholesale raids on gay establishments simply because they were gay. The relatively few times authorities harassed gay bars, it was usually part of a larger raid against illegal liquor or gambling, and most raids occurred close to municipal elections and holidays when authorities likely hoped to appear tough on crime. Shortly after Oklahomans voted to end state-wide prohibition in 1959, Oklahoma City was home to 90 private clubs and 173 taverns, serving a population of approximately 370,000. The number of taverns, post-repeal increased only slightly, as they sold beer, which had been legal in Oklahoma City since 1933. The increase in private clubs was very significant, however, as between

1920” (Ph.D. diss., Oklahoma State University, 2003); Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 155-156. An Oklahoma City police officer’s monthly salary in the early 1950s was \$175. As a result, the police force was chronically understaffed.

⁴¹ Jim Fortenberry, follow-up telephone interview by author, 7/2/2005.

1960 and 1963, the number increased by fifty percent, from sixty to ninety.⁴²

Traditionally, private clubs proved more difficult to police because patrons gained admission only by invitation, and the police could not simply saunter in and make identification checks on a whim -- they needed just cause to enter. The rapid increase of private clubs in a short two-year period, meant that the police were simply unable to monitor them all. This forced them to be somewhat selective, and as a result they started going after the high-profile arrests, places with reputations for vice and debauchery. Gay and gay-friendly bars were easy targets, given the freedom they enjoyed throughout the late-1940s and 1950s, and authorities stepped up enforcement.⁴³

A final and very significant factor that radically affected the Oklahoma City gay male subculture was the election of Curtis P. Harris as Oklahoma County Attorney in 1964.⁴⁴ Admitted to the Oklahoma bar in 1933, Harris served eighteen years as a federal attorney and also spent time as an assistant in the Oklahoma State Attorney General's office. Harris campaigned in 1964 to clean up Oklahoma City, promising a "complete new deal" if elected. He cited "unwieldy and lackadaisical methods of the present administration...(that) stems from the lack of rigid prosecution" as being to blame for the rapid increase in major crimes in Oklahoma County. Once elected, Harris fought everything from illegal liquor sales, to prostitution, to lewd movies, often using his assistant county attorneys as informants, or even bait, during his personal investigations.

⁴² "Repeal Increases Nightlife in City," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/12/1964, 9.

⁴³ Arnold Lee, interviews by author, 2/11/2005 and 8/13/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interviews by author, 4/17/2005 and 7/3/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 8/9/2005.

⁴⁴ County Attorneys are now classified as District Attorneys in Oklahoma.

He was so zealous in his efforts that one exasperated Oklahoma City resident remarked to his face, “you’re only interested in queers, whores, and dirty bookstores.” Harris’s hatred for gay and bisexual men was communicated to and felt by virtually every individual interviewed for this project. “He was going to clean up Oklahoma City---his own personal crusade,” recalled Jim Fortenberry.⁴⁵

Indeed, vice and sex crimes formed a core element of Harris’s entire tenure as County Attorney, which lasted until his death in 1976, but homosexuality was always near the top of his hit list.⁴⁶ The exact motivation behind Harris’s hatred of gay men is unknown, but his feelings on the subject were far from unknown. A devout Baptist, Harris frequently invoked Biblical imagery when discussing crime and punishment in Oklahoma County. In 1965, he made the lecture circuit in Baptist churches all over Oklahoma County, preaching to the choir so to speak, giving talks on “Crime and Delinquency.”⁴⁷ In a 1968 address before a group of Kiwanis clubs in Midwest City, Curtis Harris argued that sex deviation was a grave societal threat through which “races of mankind throughout history have destroyed themselves.” In a presentation complete with examples of morally unacceptable magazines, books, and pornographic films

⁴⁵ “Spirited Contest Seen for County Attorney,” *Daily Oklahoman* 4/20/1964, 51; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005. Prevette’s mother confronted Harris during one of his celebratory reelection campaign stops and made the remark concerning his fascination with victimless crime; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 7/3/2005; See articles in the *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/21/1965, 4, 11/1/1965, 16, and 4/24/1969, 16.

⁴⁶ *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/25/1974, 33. In 1974, Harris was running for reelection and was opposed by his long-time lieutenant, Al Hoch. Hoch stated that he and other Oklahoma County residents were dismayed at Harris’s long-time preoccupation with vice and victimless crimes.

⁴⁷ “Harris Slates Talk at Church,” *Daily Oklahoman* 8/21/1965, 12. Harris spoke at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Nicoma Park’s First Baptist Church, and Del City’s First Southern Baptist Church during the fall of 1965.

gathered by *his* office during raids, the Oklahoma County attorney warned that society “is coming to the point where sex perversion is becoming fashionable,” and he encouraged citizens to support the police department in battling this social cancer.⁴⁸

Several months later, in a debate at a University of Oklahoma Philosophy Club meeting with professor Francis Kovach, Curtis Harris laid bare his feelings even more clearly. “Many of our children are influenced into a life of sex crimes after reading pornographic literature,” he argued. “I have 20 books here. Let a man read these every night for six months and I guarantee he can’t help but become a sex pervert.” In adding that educators should promote “character development” instead of materialism, Harris stressed that societies must “follow the Ten Commandments or they will perish.” One of the more than 200 students who attended the debate asked Harris whether he feared becoming a sex pervert since he reads aloud from so much of the material he finds objectionable. The county attorney sardonically replied that he was “older” and immune to that sort of thing.⁴⁹

Curtis Harris and his attacks from the county attorney’s office are legendary, but he often stepped outside of his function as head prosecutor to actually investigate crimes, both real and perceived. Shortly after becoming county attorney he accompanied police on a New Year’s Eve raid at the Congress Jolly Inn, where several young residents had rented rooms and were drinking. It was a mixed group of both adults and minors, although all were under twenty-two. Harris called police and watched the raid unfold.

⁴⁸ “Harris Slaps Sex Deviation,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/23/1968, 47. It seems odd that the district attorney would personally accompany county sheriff deputies on raids, but apparently it was common under Harris.

⁴⁹ “Obscenity Debated: DA, Professor Disagree,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/3/1968, 49.

A common pleas judge dismissed the charges for lack of evidence, as Harris failed to secure warrants and all of those drinking alcohol were of age. An exasperated Harris declared, “What is immoral anymore?,” apparently dissatisfied that the judge did not share his distaste for alcohol.⁵⁰

The social and economic standing of those investigated was less important than uncovering and rooting out the homosexual menace for Harris, but if those investigated happened to be professional, wealthy, or members of high society, so much the better. Even members of the bar, who possessed the knowledge and means to fight such a campaign, were not immune:

There was a very hostile attitude officially in Oklahoma City. (In the 1960s) the district attorney was a man named Curtis Harris and he had an assistant. They used to go to my friend’s house, his name was “JS,” he’s dead now, and take license tags of people who were at social functions. It was very invasive. I got a call from this assistant who said that if I would give him the names of all the people at the parties he would close my file. I said, “You and I went to different law schools, and I am not about to do that.” That was the last I heard of it, but it was scary. Another friend of mine at the same time was called in for an interview. He is now in Tulsa and a well-known interior designer, but it scared him so bad he closed his shop in Shepherd Mall and moved to Dallas.⁵¹

In January of 1966, Harris launched an ambitious six-month investigation into a “homosexual ring” in the Oklahoma City public schools. His goal was to identify homosexuals and keep them from corrupting children. In an interesting side-note, prosecuting the offenders was not the goal, and apparently not a single educator faced charges. Like so many of Harris’s campaigns, this was about public humiliation, for gay and bisexual men could teach in Oklahoma City in 1966, unless their past included some

⁵⁰ “Six City Motel Raid Cases Dropped,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/22/1966, 1.

⁵¹ Interview with Bill Rogers, 9/18/2004, Oklahoma City.

kind of compromising sexual situation. Statistics regarding the success of the purge varied widely. According to Harris, some twenty-six faculty members and administrators resigned by the following July, all of them admitted homosexuals. Alex Higdon, an assistant to the superintendent, believed that over the previous three years only twelve resignations for such activity had occurred.⁵² This was high drama for Harris, however, and it played to his political promise to “clean things up.” That it targeted otherwise respected professionals only added to the satisfaction. Harris noted that prominent citizens pressured him to quash the investigation, but he intended to pursue it to the end. The bombast by Harris and the fear this campaign generated made national news, as the *New York Times* ran a small article about the investigation. While he served as Oklahoma County attorney, Curtis Harris actively pursued homosexuals, and sought to eliminate them from Oklahoma City if by no other means than humiliating them:

Curtis P. Harris was an evil man on his best day. Rumor has it that he had a gay son, who he had institutionalized because he (Harris) couldn’t handle it. Not only did he go out of his way to persecute gay people, but he also believed that if you had ever been arrested or served time for anything, you should be in jail for the rest of your life. What they would also do if you were in jail for shoplifting or writing bad checks, and they were looking for a rapist, they would haul you out of work or home to stand in a lineup. How long do you think you would be able to keep a job? They would keep doing it and keep doing it until they put people in a position where they didn’t have any choice but to break the law, and then they put them back in jail. The man was insane. I know of vendettas against gay people, periodic rounding up of people---not merely before elections as in the past. He really hated gay people.⁵³

⁵² See *Oklahoma Journal*, 7/10/1966; “26 Quit School Jobs in Drive On Oklahoma City Deviates,” *New York Times*, 7/12/1966, 36.

⁵³ Paul Thompson, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 12/22/2004.

Harris's reach and reputation extended so far that merely the threat of his involvement made gay and bisexual men quake in fear. More gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents moved, shut down their businesses, or succumbed to blackmail in order to avoid dealing with Harris.

80% of the queers in this world are not "out," men especially, so it makes one vulnerable to blackmail and depression. The reason why W.A. had to sell half of his interest in the Red Lion---it was a goldmine!---he fell in love with a 19-year-old kid. W.A. wrote letters. Never write a letter! The kid had a whole stack of them, and was going to go to Curtis Harris, so (W.A.) gave him money. He ended up selling his half of the bar for \$1000. Hell, that place made that much money for him in a month! But (W.A.) was between a rock and a hard place, because he was a barber, and all of these self-regulated industries had morals clauses in their licensure---every friggin one of them. If someone wants to play hardball with you, it's very easy for them to do.⁵⁴

Although state sodomy prosecutions continued under Curtis Harris' term, the incidence of lesser-felony charges, and a host of misdemeanor charges, increased dramatically. For instance, in 1966, H.T. propositioned an Oklahoma City undercover police detective at the Playland Arcade, located on Sheridan Avenue downtown. The prosecutor reduced the charge, from attempted sodomy to offering to engage in an act of lewdness. The following year, a similar charge was filed against R.M.B., this time at Penn Square Mall, a popular site for cruising in the late 1960s. R.M.B. pled guilty to the lewdness charge, received a suspended sentence, and a \$50 fine. Later that year, Oklahoma City police officers caught two men having sex in a parked car in southwest Oklahoma City. Before Harris assumed office, these two almost certainly would have faced sodomy charges in state court, instead of engaging in acts of lewdness, which

⁵⁴ Quote taken from Ralph Prevette, follow-up interview by author, 1/12/2005; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005.

carried a decidedly smaller sentence.⁵⁵ One possible reason that Harris and his deputies occasionally opted for the lesser charges was that they were less complicated. People charged with lewdness would plead guilty, pay a fine, and move on, as the charge was less specific and carried fewer stigmas than a sodomy charge. Handling sex crimes cases in this way allowed the county attorney's office to look tough on crime, clear a boatload of cases quickly since many men pled guilty, and still manage to punish gay and bisexual men. Even though charges were reduced, the names of those charged with lewdness made the *Daily Oklahoman* with enough details to make sure that readers knew that the offense involved homosexual relations. Harris did not care anyway – he was about long-range punishment and humiliation. Names in the newspaper were more salient in that regard than suspended sodomy sentences.

Perhaps the depth of Curtis Harris's hatred for gay and bisexual men, and the tenacity with which he pursued them, is most clearly illuminated by the way he hounded gay bar owners in Oklahoma City, particularly local club legend Arnold Lee. Lee opened one of Oklahoma City's most notorious bars, Lee's Lounge, in 1965. Orphaned at a very young age, Lee moved around a lot as a child while living with various family members, most of whom were Pentecostal Holiness ministers. While living in Oakland, California, the fanaticism and alcoholism of his family drove him to strike out on his own when only fourteen years old. Lee worked as a busboy in a number of restaurants until he stumbled into a gay bar in Los Angeles and met a man who lived in drag. Arnold was

⁵⁵ State v. H.T., case #35123, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; State v. R.M.B., case #36125, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma; State v. D.A.M. and C.J.H, case #37446, Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. Details of these and other cases appeared in the *Daily Oklahoman* after 1964.

immediately smitten and the two moved in together, and Arnold started living in drag as well. While fleeing after a party that the two attended on Sunset Boulevard was raided, the police arrested Arnold Lee and threw him into the female holding cell awaiting a mandatory check for venereal diseases. A terrified Arnold kept going to the back of the line again and again until he was forced to tell a jailer his secret. Thereafter isolated from the other prisoners, Arnold was the target of amazement: “now I know how a caged animal feels, as everybody came to take a look.” After a short stay in a reform school, Arnold came back to Oklahoma and lived with an aunt and uncle in Guthrie, who allowed him to join the Navy while underage.⁵⁶

After his obligatory service in Europe during World War II ended, Arnold Lee returned to Oklahoma City with a Latvian national as his bride, and they enrolled in beauty college together. Eventually, the pair opened their own hair and nail salon located on Western Avenue. In 1960, a friend talked Arnold into opening a beer bar down in the Paseo district, an event that launched his long and lucrative career in the bar business in Oklahoma City. Lee’s Lounge was not a glamorous place to visit, but it had its charms. Like the Mayflower, Lee’s Lounge featured an elaborate art piece painted on the entry wall, but it was certainly more risqué---a “Peter Tree,” with penis and testicle shaped fruit hanging from the branches. People came from all over to see it.⁵⁷ The Lounge also had a modest stage on which Arnold Lee held drag shows. Current female impersonator legend Ginger Lamar performed at Lee’s:

⁵⁶ Arnold Lee, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 2/11/2005.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

There usually was one bar per city that had a show. In Oklahoma City at the time, it was Lee's Lounge, and that's where I first appeared in Oklahoma City. When I first worked there, they did their shows on Sunday nights, and they had guest bands that would come in. My first night, they had a black band that did all the Motown Music- soul music. When you put your music on- at that time it was records, this band would play background music for you, so it gave you that feeling that you were almost singing live. It was a very small work area, & you basically stood there & lip synced. But there was always a full house every time there was a show.⁵⁸

By the mid-1960s, Lee's Lounge enjoyed a virtual monopoly on the gay bar business in Oklahoma City, simply because other successful gay institutions--the Inferno, the Mayflower, the Circus Club---closed, and newer ones did not immediately take their place.⁵⁹ Other bars came and went, remaining open just long enough to receive an obligatory visit from party-minded queer residents, but Harris's war on homosexuality and the difficulties of starting a bar even under ideal circumstances stifled most chances for success. In this intolerant atmosphere, Arnold's club became an institution in Oklahoma City, but not because the bar offered striking amenities. Air conditioning was unknown at the club, and patrons broke the commodes once during either a fight or rough sex, and Arnold did not immediately replace them. Visitors used the sewer pipe for relief, and all manner of fluids covered the floor. In addition, the condition of the beer kegs left one new Oklahoma City resident in shock:

Arnold NEVER at anytime he was in the bar business had his beer kegs cleaned. Yeast grows in those lines from the keg to the tap and inside the spigot. Anybody that drank draw beer at Lee's Lounge was asking for an immediate case of dysentery. That was the first thing I was told when I came through the door there in 1966, fresh from California. I knew you could drink liquor here, but you

⁵⁸ See "Ginger Speaks" for her thoughts on Lee's Lounge at www.gingerlamar.com

⁵⁹ A Guild Guide, according to Ralph Prevette, listed 4 gay bars in Oklahoma City when he first arrived in 1966--Lee's Lounge, the Jug, the Urn, and the Click. The Jug, Urn, and Click all closed by 1965, so only Lee's Lounge was open at that time.

had to take your own bottle, in theory. I waltzed in with a bottle of vodka and sat on a barstool, and Arnold was behind the bar. He asked me what I'd have, and I said a "Black Russian"---you know, L.A. faggot! He reaches for a bottle of Crème de Coco, to which I replied "where is the Kahlua," and he said "this is the same thing..." "No, no, no nooooo!" I replied. Arnold made Vodka Gimlets with RealLemon, and screwdrivers with Donald Duck orange juice...the learning curve was kind of ugly!⁶⁰

Despite the club's shortcomings, Lee's Lounge was very successful. For many gay and bisexual men, it was the first totally, openly gay bar they visited, and it provided them with a relatively safe place to meet and socialize at a time when things were growing much more difficult for them in Oklahoma City. Ralph Prevette noted that "my first night there, I met about 30 people, and those that are still alive I know today."⁶¹

As a pioneer in the gay community, Arnold soon ran afoul of some very powerful people, including Curtis Harris. Whether it was at Harris' request or not is unclear, but police raided Lee's Lounge about twice a month and arrested Arnold Lee. The charge was always that he permitted dancing in a beer bar, which was prohibited per local ordinance.⁶² Lee responded by setting up a light alarm that would let patrons know when police officers entered the establishment. The police only half-heartedly bothered Arnold, though, as he usually bailed out within minutes and reopened the Lounge within

⁶⁰ Ralph Prevette, follow-up interview by author, 1/12/2005.

⁶¹ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005.

⁶² Title 37, Oklahoma Statutes Supp. 1943, sections 211 to 218 inclusive, forbade the sale of 3.2 beer, the only liquor allowed to be sold in Oklahoma, in dance halls and taverns where dancing was allowed. The statute provided an exemption to hotels with a certain number of rooms. Virtually every bar in Oklahoma City was affected by this law. Arnold Lee believed that Harris was responsible for the raids on his establishment.

a couple of hours. "I never even had to wear handcuffs," said Lee, and the fines were so low that they could not put a dent in Arnold's resolve or his wallet.⁶³

At that point, Lee's Lounge was one of only two openly gay male bars in all of Oklahoma City, the other being the Red Lion. The Red Lion, another Oklahoma City gay institution, first opened in 1966 and remained in business until at least 1972. Originally owned by Kenny Tivis, the Red Lion was located at Northwest 40th and May--again, outside of the traditional downtown geographic base of gay entertainment. At the height of its popularity until 1970, it was just a beer bar, which meant that eighteen was the age to enter and dancing was prohibited. The bar was relatively small, but extremely popular.

The place was always packed and everybody went there, from near-street people to Nichols Hills' piss- elegant queens. To give you an idea of the Red Lion's business, the draught sales manager at Ford Distributing (the Coors dealership) told me that the Red Lion sold more beer for its size than any bar in the state of Oklahoma. The crowd was very friendly--it had to be. We were jammed in there like sardines in a can, and a small can at that!"⁶⁴

Although Lee's Lounge was one of only two gay bars open in Oklahoma City -- and earned Arnold Lee a lot of money -- Lee grew weary of the constant raids and Harris's harassment, so he looked for another location in which to start a bar. Arnold landed in an unincorporated area in Logan County, just over the Oklahoma County line, in a large secluded building that he christened the Continental Club. Once owned by gamblers, the Continental Club sported an imposing twelve-foot chain link fence topped by razor wire that the former occupants relied on to discourage raids by authorities.

⁶³ Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005.

⁶⁴ Ralph Prevette, follow-up interview by author, 6/29/2004.

Arnold Lee opened the Continental in 1965 and quickly turned it into a successful and notorious nightspot, conveniently outside the purview of Oklahoma County District Attorney Curtis Harris. The place rocked, even though Lee opened it only three nights a week---Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Arnold Lee ignored liquor laws and forbade customers to bring their own bottle to the club, a requirement for those drinking in 1960s Oklahoma, and sold patrons alcohol on his own. He made a tremendous amount of money in a very short time.⁶⁵ The Continental held lavish drag shows behind the razor wire. Famed female impersonator, hairstylist, madam, and gay celebrity Kenneth Marlowe, also known as “Mr. Madam,” came to the secluded club and filmed over two hours of footage at one of Arnold’s balls in 1966.⁶⁶

As the previous chapter demonstrated, female impersonation and its lesser-esteemed but more prevalent cousin drag provided obvious, tangible evidence of the gay community’s presence in Oklahoma City, even during times of struggle. As a consequence of the increased policing of the gay community in general, the number of impersonation acts declined precipitously. Tony Sinclair and Gil Ray continued to work, and newcomer Ginger Lamar was just getting started, but overall it was a medium in decline. The Continental Club and Lee’s Lounge provided valuable outlets for

⁶⁵ Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005; Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005; Ginger Lamar, interview by author, 9/10/2004; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

⁶⁶ For information on Madam, see his autobiography, Kenneth Marlowe, *Mr. Madam: Confessions of a Male Madam* (Los Angeles: Sherbourne Press, 1964). Marlowe and Arnold Lee’s careers converged in a number of ways---both were hairdressers by principal trade, both were female impersonators, and both had less than angelic childhoods, marked by tragedy and discontent. Marlowe knew and worked for a number of stars in Hollywood as a hairdresser.

impersonators, and Arnold Lee was a pioneer in regard to keeping the medium at the center of the gay community:

Now, the drag balls back then were real drag balls, meaning people spent \$1000 or \$1500 on a gown at the least. Very overly exaggerated, and probably some of the most fun times in Oklahoma. One particular (person) went to the Mayflower first, stood out in front, because his ball gown was so full he had to ride in a pickup. Back then we didn't have RV's and such. So a pickup pulls up, and he's dressed out---pink gown, hair, flame city. He gets into the pickup, holds onto a rope, and rides out there (to the Continental). Cars were almost having wrecks and he was throwing candy. It was that time in the gay life that was wonderful---it was magic, fantasy, probably the most exciting time of my life.⁶⁷

All good things must end, however, and this was true for the Continental. Curtis Harris knew that Arnold devoted much of his energy to the Logan County operation, but for a long time he could do nothing about it. Apparently, the club and its patrons somehow managed to avoid much notice from authorities. In fact, undercover sheriff deputies came to collect information for a planned raid, but they enjoyed themselves so much that they brought their wives back and had the time of their lives, according to Arnold.⁶⁸ Like most of Arnold Lee's clubs, plenty of younger gay men prowled about – some of them under the legal drinking age. Although keeping people with fake identifications out of any bar, gay or straight, is problematic, Lee turned a blind eye to underage people in his bar for two reasons. First, they made money for him, because wherever young and single gay men are carousing, so too will older gay and bisexual men attracted to the young and beautiful, and the latter group spends money. Second, Lee genuinely wanted to provide young queer men with a place to call their own, a place free from harassment. This became problematic after a couple of serious auto accidents-

⁶⁷ Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005.

⁶⁸ Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005 .

--the product of inebriation and a hairpin curve in front of the club---brought attention to the club. Curtis Harris was the principal informant for the raid conducted by Logan County sheriff deputies on November 27, 1966. Deputies hauled twenty people off to the Logan County jail, including Arnold Lee and his bartender. Most of those arrested were under twenty-one, so prosecutors charged them with vagrancy. Lee faced charges of operating an open saloon, permitting dancing where beer was sold, and selling beer after hours. The Continental closed that night at 2:30 A.M., and it never reopened.⁶⁹

That raid, much like the Continental itself, became something of a legendary event in the Oklahoma City gay community. "One year we went and the place was raided and they had a fence with barbed wire around the whole thing. You have never seen so many petticoats and rhinestones hanging from a fence in your life because they jumped the fence and half of the costume stayed put," remarked Jim McMurray.⁷⁰ The liquor charges and presence of minors in the bar were serious, and Curtis Harris probably felt rather pleased that he could shake Arnold Lee down once again, even from afar. In a curious turn of events, however, Arnold Lee managed to avoid massive fines or jail time, and Curtis Harris would be denied a great deal of satisfaction. As Ralph Prevette related:

The night they were busted, there were over 60 people there, and about 30 of them were minors. What saved his ass was that (one of those arrested) was only sixteen, and (his) daddums was a Logan County Commissioner, and he was not about to have his name besmirched. Now Curtis Harris, the OK County DA had been the instigating informant, and he had tipped off state authorities, but all prosecutions had to be in Logan County. The county judge had no desire to get

⁶⁹ "Club Raided Near Guthrie," *Daily Oklahoman* 11/28/1966, 1; "Club Owner, Bartender Post Bonds Following Raid," *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/29/1966, 41.

⁷⁰ Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005.

into a pissing contest with a county commissioner. So, they dismissed the charges---pure luck for Arnold Lee!⁷¹

The events in Logan County left Arnold Lee discouraged. All of his attempts to own and operate openly-gay establishments were besieged by bad luck and zealous authorities, and Arnold's health suffered as a result. Arnold Lee kept a low profile for a while before resurfacing in the summer of 1969 when he opened the Villa Royale. Located on Paseo next door to his former club, Lee's Lounge, the Villa Royale was one of the swankiest clubs in Oklahoma City and easily the nicest club Lee ever owned. Modeled after the Jewel Box in Kansas City,⁷² the Villa offered patrons rich velvet upholstered drapes and overstuffed high-backed chairs. Unlike Arnold's other bars, he opened the Villa Royale to attract straight customers. It was ironic that Lee coveted a straight clientele for his new venture, given that the number of places they had to socialize already outnumbered gay establishments ten-to-one, and some members of the Oklahoma City queer community felt a little betrayed.⁷³ To be fair, Arnold likely tried to keep his foot in the bar business in Oklahoma City by opening the Villa. Lee's Lounge, rebuilt after a devastating fire in 1968, would no longer sustain him thanks to Curtis Harris. He leased the club to another individual, who tried to make a go of it, but

⁷¹ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005.

⁷² The Jewel Box was located at 3219 Troost in Kansas City and was part of an entertainment complex containing two other gay bars. It was open six days a week and featured 3 to 4 shows nightly by some of the most outstanding female impersonators, or "femme mimics," around. It was probably a less glitzy version of the infamous tourist bar in San Francisco, Finnochio's.

⁷³ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005.

ran into financing problems. The Villa Royale was his last shot, Arnold assumed, and he wanted to expand his customer base.⁷⁴

Since Lee hoped to attract a mixed audience, he booked entertainment that would be popular with all patrons, regardless of their sexuality. Rusty Warren appeared several times to packed audiences, as did well-known female impersonators Billy Carroll, Pat St. Patrick, and Kelly Spencer, who also worked at Jewel Box. Tony Sinclair, late of the Inferno fame, made the majority of his appearances in straight clubs all over town when he agreed to showcase at the Villa. On an amusing note, when Lee advertised for his new club, he photographed Tony Sinclair reclining on a chair under the theme of “unusual floor shows.” The advertising staff at the *Daily Oklahoman* apparently did not understand that the Villa Royale was a nightclub, and that Tony Sinclair was actually a man, because they ran the notice in the women’s section of the paper, right beside advertisements for Jerome’s and Everest Galleries. The Villa initially was a huge success, netting Arnold Lee over \$5000 in its first month, but its lifespan was to be cut short. The Villa Royale closed six months later as a result of continued harassment from locals and the Oklahoma City police.⁷⁵

At that juncture, the LGBT community was reeling in Oklahoma City. The newly-empowered police department harassed gay bars and nightspots, and Curtis Harris’s prosecutorial zeal shocked many residents and altered the social landscape considerably. Urban renewal also altered socialization patterns for queer residents.

⁷⁴ Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005.

⁷⁵ Rusty Warren, email interview by author, 7/25/2005; *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/23/1969, 37; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005.

Urban renewal in Oklahoma City was a controversial program, even in the 1960s. While touted as a way to attract investors to the downtown area and bring Oklahoma City into the 20th century – indeed urban renewal is steeped in the notion that people have the ability to transform their world – many historically-significant properties needlessly were razed. The Oklahoma City Urban Renewal Authority (OCURA) was created in 1961 by the city council, taking advantage of a bill authorizing such groups that was passed by the state legislature in 1959. A pronounced downtown retail flight had occurred for some time but it became especially acute during the late 1950s and early 1960s when both Shepherd Mall and Penn Square Mall were completed. These significant retail outlets siphoned off businesses that had called downtown Oklahoma City home for decades. OCURA proceeded slowly, as funding problems prevented any significant projects from starting until 1963. The organization spent much of the late 1960s and early 1970s buying land all over Oklahoma City, destroying many older buildings, some of which dated from statehood. To be sure, the renovations required to bring some of the structures up to current utility and safety standards were simply too expensive. Others simply had outlived their usefulness. Some managed to be converted into private hands, such as Union Station and the Colcord Building, and were significantly remodeled, which effectively removed them from the public use. Between 1967 and 1973, OCURA spent over \$63 million buying land, demolishing structures, realigning streets, and updating utilities. As a result, Oklahoma City residents were able to build a state-of-the-art medical complex and research center, and the John F. Kennedy Housing Project, which

resulted in over 1000 new homes and several apartment structures for low-income residents.⁷⁶

Even more ambitious was OCURA's downtown rehabilitation program that started in 1964, and drastically altered the physical landscape. One of the primary forces behind the program was Mayor George Shirk, a prominent Oklahoma City attorney, historian, and civic leader who was essentially drafted to become mayor in 1964.⁷⁷ As a committed historical preservationist, Shirk deeply loved the architecture of the downtown skyline, but he knew that some of the buildings were too outdated or too expensive to renovate. Only two days after Shirk took office, architect I.M. Pei unveiled a twenty-year plan to revitalize the downtown area he had prepared for several prominent city businessmen associated with OCURA. Modeled after Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen, the plan called for a centralized convention center, urban housing, and a slew of retail and business centers all around the core downtown area. The overall economic investment by private sources to downtown Oklahoma City, upon completion of the over five-hundred acre plan, was expected to be in excess of \$220 million. It was, however, going to be expensive to start and require long-term financial backing. Shirk stumped hard for the Pei Plan, speaking all over Oklahoma City at clubs and luncheons asking for residents' support. Shirk also lobbied the state legislature to allow cities to charge a sales tax to finance improvements. This was vital not only for the future of the Pei Plan, but also to make Oklahoma City's fiscal system as modern and stable as those found in

⁷⁶ Blackburn, *Heart of the Promised Land*, 166-171; Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 236; Roy P. Stewart, *Born Grown: The Story of Oklahoma City* (Oklahoma City: Fidelity Bank, National Association, 1974), 284-293; .

⁷⁷ "Support Reportedly Lined Up to Appoint George Shirk Mayor," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/16/1964, 1; "Citizen to Mayor In Three Minutes," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/17/1964.

any other like-sized metropolis. The legislature approved the bill, and Mayor Shirk quickly put a one-cent sales tax proposal before Oklahoma City residents. It passed by a two-to-one margin, no small feat for those familiar with the prospects of raising taxes in Oklahoma.⁷⁸

The effects of the Pei Plan, and urban renewal in general, on the gay and bisexual male subculture in Oklahoma City were pronounced. Grand Avenue, which had been renamed Sheridan in 1962, was almost completely destroyed between Broadway and Robinson to build the Myriad Gardens Center. This meant that many of the small beer bars that queer residents used since the 1940s as social and sexual gateways were demolished. Gone were the Manhattan, Sweet Leona's and the original Mirror Lounge. The Biltmore Hotel, the Huckins Hotel, the Kingcade Hotel, and the Hudson Hotel – all popular sexual spots downtown -- were also felled, as were the Criterion, the Warner, and the Midwest Theaters. Union Station was purchased by a private company and remodeled for use as an office building, which effectively removed it from among the city's queer sexual landscape as well.⁷⁹

Other downtown buildings were razed to accommodate utility relocation, the owner's inability to bring them up to local codes, or the owners' opportunistic escape. This altered the cruising atmosphere tremendously in the late 1960s. Before, with a plethora of downtown spots for sex, food, and socialization, downtown became and remained the sexual center for gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City. Gay and

⁷⁸ Howard Meredith and Mary Ellen Meredith, *Mr. Oklahoma History: The Life of George H. Shirk* (Oklahoma City: Western Heritage Association Books, 1982), 90-94, 103-127; Stewart, *Born Grown*, 284-293; *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/10/1965.

⁷⁹ Owens, *Oklahoma Justice*, 236-237; Griffith, *Oklahoma City, 1930 to the Millennium*, 11, 68-77.

bisexual men created a public presence that did not immediately lead to any kind of significant or sustained police action. After so many of these landmarks disappeared, however, downtown became almost completely synonymous with hustlers and “rough trade,”⁸⁰ an element that a lot of gay and bisexual residents tried to avoid. Gay businessmen recognized this as well, and it suggests why places like the Red Lion, Lee’s Lounge, and the Circa – all queer landmarks by the early 1970s – were located outside of the old downtown area.⁸¹

Complementing the changes wrought by urban renewal in altering the downtown sexual landscape was the continued diligence on the part of the police to control it. As discussed earlier, the Oklahoma City Police Department significantly altered the scope and practice of controlling vice after constitutionally-mandated prohibition ended in 1959. New methods, better equipment, and a shift in targets -- from alcohol to prostitution and homosexuality -- made for high-profile arrests and a rising level of discomfort felt by gay and bisexual men. The fresh wave of police officers that entered the force, many of whom undoubtedly hoped to advance their careers by making arrests and getting their names in the newspaper, also accelerated the war on vice. The vice squad consisted of only about sixteen detectives, but that force equaled other divisions

⁸⁰ “Trade” is a euphemism for men – straight or possibly bisexual – who sought out sexual release that would not be reciprocated on their part. Presumably, “rough trade” would be those who were also somewhat more physical or violent than some gay men preferred.

⁸¹ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2004; Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/27/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005.

within the police department in size, and these officers were dedicated.⁸² One new officer that figured prominently in virtually every major vice bust for the next twenty years was Kenneth “Sugar” Smith.⁸³ Ever diligent, Smith once arrested a pair of young men stopped at an intersection in Oklahoma City for kissing one another in a car.⁸⁴ Smith’s colleagues also went in search of homosexuals, sometimes going to great extremes to make an arrest. In 1968, officers arrested a man for making a lewd suggestion to an undercover police detective in the restroom of the downtown public library. The man made small talk with the officer in a restroom across the street, and the officer followed the suspect into the library restroom where he allegedly made the advance. It is striking, in this case, that a detective followed the suspect all the way across the street into another restroom, to see if the man would make a lewd gesture toward him. The suspect told police he was a female impersonator from Long Beach, California, a fact that probably won him little respect with the officer.⁸⁵ As this case suggests, the vice squad pursued gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City more aggressively, and they were getting better at it.

⁸² “Is There Victimless Crime?” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/1/1972, 21. Police Chief Watson argued that vice was a low priority under his administration, yet statistics for 1971 indicated that the vice squad had the same number of detectives as the homicide, juvenile, and stolen property divisions. In addition, the arrests for vice and other serious crimes like rape and robbery and assault, were almost identical. It was clear that vice remained a very important part of the police department’s focus.

⁸³ The sobriquet “Sugar” stemmed from his arrest and subsequent unsuccessful prosecution of activist Paul Thompson in 1969, detailed in chapter eight. Thompson, upon declaring his innocence, addressed his note to Officer “Sugar” Smith, a nickname that followed him throughout his career.

⁸⁴ “Pair Arrested In Morals Case,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/4/1968, 10.

⁸⁵ “Visit Leads Man to Jail,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/9/1968, 13.

When not patrolling tearooms, officers started making undercover visits to gay bars all over Oklahoma City. In June of 1965, authorities arrested twenty-one men during a raid at a downtown club. Vice detectives Tony Boswell and Ken “Sugar” Smith sat in the Jug Bar, 411 West Sheridan, for almost two hours, watching patrons and taking mental notes. At the accepted time, uniformed police entered and made the arrests for what the undercover officers called “making indecent and lewd gestures and motions.” The Jug closed shortly after the raid, having been in business only about two years.⁸⁶

A larger raid occurred in 1968, one significant for its motivation and portents for the future. On September 15, 1968, vice detectives Larry Henderson and Benny Lovett staked out The Warehouse, located at 919 North Hudson. After spending a couple of hours in the establishment observing “men kissing and caressing each other,” Henderson and Lovett called for backup, and the police arrested thirty people -- twenty-seven men and three women -- and charged them with the usual litany of disorderly conduct and loitering around a disorderly house. This raid was memorable, however, for two reasons. First, at the time of the raid, patrons were enjoying a drag show, which police clumsily referred to as a “beauty contest for men.” The presence of drag immediately identified the Warehouse as a gay club, and it probably gave the officers and the general public a chuckle as the newspaper recounted that some of the men “were clad in tight fitting women’s dresses and their faces were caked with lipstick, mascara, and rouge.” Second,

⁸⁶ For information on the Jug, see “21 Arrested in Club Raid.” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/8/1965, page 2.

in a chilling final comment, Lieutenant Jim Watson noted that at least six other bars and taverns that “cater to a particular type of crowd” were under surveillance.⁸⁷

Only five months later, vice detectives raided another gay bar, this time arresting forty men, the largest haul yet. Detective Harold Behrens observed men dancing with each other at The Club, located at 1724 Northwest 16th. Officers arrested patrons and charged them with disorderly conduct, while the owner, Roy Mastin, faced charges of permitting dancing in an establishment where beer was sold.⁸⁸ This raid signaled that the Oklahoma City police now targeted gay clubs simply because they were for gay men.

By all accounts, The Club was a rather upscale establishment. As Ralph relates,

Roy was a little guy who ‘refinished’ antique furniture and ‘antiqued’ the wood in old houses, both of which were foolish fixations of 1960s yuppies. He got The Club, faux-finished everything in it, laid rather pretty Mexican tile floors, installed a bridge table by the fireplace, and had black-light visible Beardsley drawings on the walls. Needless to say, The Club was a great hit with the chi-chi set.⁸⁹

These raids on the Warehouse and The Club put gay bars in Oklahoma City on notice -- the police were coming, they were singling out gay bars for surveillance, and they were serious about shutting them down. While the Warehouse was rather notorious, The Club was an upscale tavern, one known as a predominantly gay establishment only by reputation. The fact that police targeted it, and arrested so many patrons simply for being there, sent a signal throughout the Oklahoma City gay male world. Gay bars, once the only salvation for many, now were an “enter at your own risk” proposition.

⁸⁷ “Police Arrest 30 in ‘Beauty’ Show,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/16/1968, 1.

⁸⁸ “40 Men Jailed In Raid on Club,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/15/1969, 1.

⁸⁹ Ralph Prevette, email correspondence, 10/24/2004.

As a result of the continued police presence, and the wrecking ball via urban renewal, the number of gay bars in downtown Oklahoma City declined precipitously, and those that remained open became little more than hustler havens. This truism applied to one of the last new gay bars to open downtown, the Burgundy Club, owned by Virginia “Ginny” White. Located at 434 West Main next to the Union Bus Station, the Burgundy was not unlike other downtown establishments in the 1960s---small, inelegant, owned by a woman, and home to a thriving hustler trade. By the late 1960s, street cruising by male prostitutes got much riskier, as undercover officers roamed Sheridan Avenue in force looking for arrests. As a result, the area trolled by male prostitutes shrank in order to take advantage of strength in numbers: fewer streets, and more eyes searching for police officers. The area along Harvey Street, between Sheridan and Couch, became legendary for having more hustlers per square-foot than any other spot in Oklahoma City. Interview participants fondly referred to it as the “milk run” or the “meat rack,” a reference to the high volume of sex traded, sought, and sold. The Burgundy was located only a block from this meat rack, and the fondness with which patrons recalled the Burgundy varied directly to their preference for young hustlers. “It was a terrific little hustler bar,” remembered one patron, while another recalled “that place was for rough trade on Main Street, and pimps.” People of all races made up the regular clientele of the Burgundy, which made it unusual among gay bars in Oklahoma City but more in keeping with establishments in other, larger cities like New York and Philadelphia.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Originally, Virginia White incorporated the Burgundy as the Holiday Lounge Club. Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/27/2005; Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005.

All cities of a certain size have bars like the Burgundy. It was always located within walking distance of the bus station, where prison punks fresh out of the joint with their cheap suit and \$20 went. The guys come out of the bus station and if they don't know where the nearest queer bar is, they'll find out. They go there, they hookup, whatever. I mean it was a given. I was in the Burgundy probably about a dozen times the whole time I was here.⁹¹

By the close of the 1960s, the Oklahoma City gay male world was much less prosperous, open, or visible than it had been in the 1950s due to a convergence of factors. First, the increased attention that Americans paid to crime and delinquency in general hit home for many Oklahoma City residents when a series of embarrassing articles made the city look unwholesome. Residents demanded that something be done, and the city responded by reorganizing the police department and increasing the frequency and severity of raids on homosexual institutions. Hostile medical opinions made life miserable for many gay men. By classifying homosexuals as mentally unstable people, they encouraged officials to seek treatment for gay men, which in at least one case included castration. When Oklahomans repealed constitutionally-mandated prohibition in 1959, it effectively ended the long, unsuccessful and all-consuming war that authorities had raged on alcohol. Resources and manpower now shifted to other social ills, such as homosexuality. Patrons never knew if the cute young man sitting next to them in a bar was a vice detective, waiting to arrest them and haul them downtown. Their names would likely be made public if they fought the charges. The increased police presence led downtown hustlers and meat mongers to congregate in smaller areas and in a few seedy downtown bars. Curtis Harris unleashed the most direct assaults on gay men to date in Oklahoma City in 1964 following his election as Oklahoma County Attorney.

⁹¹ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005.

Harris fused his deep religious convictions and his wide prosecutorial power to ruin people's lives and make running a gay business infinitely more difficult. Harris, more than any other single individual, changed the character of queer life in Oklahoma City. When these factors merged with a general movement of the economic and social centers of Oklahoma City to the north and west of downtown via urban renewal, predominantly gay bars, owned by openly gay men and women, no longer existed downtown. The Oklahoma City gay male world, once thriving, suffered a major setback in the 1960s, as the post-World War II years of relative success and openness gave way to fear.

Chapter VI

The Pink Tea Queens:

Class, Status, and Position Within the Respectable Queer World

For decades in Oklahoma City, a divide ran throughout the gay and bisexual community, one that separated men according to class and social position. Caucasian men from lower middle and lower socioeconomic circumstances found it easier to be gay in Oklahoma City, some going so far as to take a lover, regularly attend gay bars and drag shows, and generally live an openly gay lifestyle for the time. Wealthier men, men who occupied positions of status and political importance, and those who held occupational licenses with strict morals clauses, entertained privately. Through a circuit of private parties, civic affairs, interstate travel, and fraternal organizations, these upper class gay and bisexual men forged their own subculture, one that operated parallel to the gay and bisexual subculture at large. Many undoubtedly hoped to avoid detection, as losing their jobs or clientele was a possibility, but public humiliation was guaranteed. Others simply preferred socializing with men from their own socioeconomic background. In any case, the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male world was one that had the trappings of class divisions, and rarely did those divisions blur.

Two of the most remarkable aspects of the Oklahoma City sexual landscape from its founding were its variety and chutzpah. As earlier chapters demonstrated, downtown Oklahoma City had always been a Mecca for sexuality openly displayed. Theaters, bars,

and private clubs catered to gay and straight audiences alike. Prostitution was a constant, again for people of any sexual orientation, and the police proved unable and unwilling to stop it. In this atmosphere of benign indifference, working-class gay and bisexual men carved out a public space that, in retrospect, was obvious to those willing to look. Another stratum of gay and bisexual men chose to remain somewhat removed from the mainstream gay world in Oklahoma City. These were middle-class and wealthy men, those who were college-educated, had better jobs or at least professional occupations, and more disposable income to fund their activities. Many came from pioneer Oklahoma City founding families, and they had connections. Others came to Oklahoma City directly out of the military¹ and decided to stay when they realized that gay people existed here:

I did not have a lot of gay companions, not until I came to Oklahoma City. I was in the Army for 39 months. I was a front-line medic, and I had a tent-mate who was also French. It just killed me...I loved him so much! He left to join the Free French movement and I then had my tent alone. Then I became a nurse, finished in the Air Force, and then came to Oklahoma City instead of going back east. I met a lot of gay guys here!²

The means and methods of socialization used by upper-class men were not entirely distinct from their working-class counterparts, but they were certainly more discreet. As a result of higher incomes and family money, these men held parties in their homes in some of the finest neighborhoods in Oklahoma City, such as Heritage Hills and

¹ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/27/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005.

² Earnest, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 3/27/2005.

Nichols Hills.³ “We always met at each others’ homes for parties---not sex parties, usually---and threw the hash around. Sometimes we’d get in drag and have a lot of fun,” remembers Earnest, a retired health care professional.⁴ Attorney William “Bill” Rogers also remembers that:

I had quite a number of gay friends. From the beginning when I came out there was a subculture of people that entertained in our homes basically...It was actually a very secretive subculture. People were VERY careful. My first lover had not been “out” but self-identified as gay, and he already had a circle of friends that I fit right into. And people came and went. There was a party most weekends and a lot of Sunday afternoon partying. They were both planned and informal.⁵

Although the concept of remaining hidden or circumspect -- closeted, even -- might seem contrary to the notion of community-building, it was in fact central to it for Pink Tea Queens.⁶ For a sense of community to develop, it would seem axiomatic that gay and bisexual men would need to find one another, enjoy common sources of recreation and socialization, and communicate sub cultural norms between members in such a way that led to the codification of those norms. Since bar attendance was not possible on a consistent basis, private parties became extensions of community building, albeit on a more circumspect scale. By holding parties in the homes of wealthy homosexuals, by communicating the location of these parties and “advertising” them via word of mouth and private communication, upper-class gay and bisexual men carved out

³ For a discussion of the development of Heritage Hills and its historical significance, see Bob L. Blackburn, *Heritage Hills: Preservation of A Historic Neighborhood* (Oklahoma City: Western Heritage Books, 1990).

⁴ Earnest, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 3/27/2005.

⁵ Bill Rogers, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 9/18/2004 and 3/3/2005 follow-up.

⁶ A sobriquet used by working-class Oklahoma City residents that referred to well-heeled gay and bisexual men.

a world for themselves that was nourishing, queer, and workable within the larger, heterosexual socioeconomic world in Oklahoma City. Private affairs allowed a safe, controlled atmosphere for socialization where men expressed alternative sexual preferences within their peer group. Thus, private parties could function as springboards for upper-class men into the gay and bisexual world and also as key markers of sub-cultural development. The virtual lack of public information about these parties is a testament to the effectiveness of the secrecy that the community used, yet this party network was obviously functional. “There was the ‘in’ crowd as they called themselves. This was back in the 1940s when I first came (to Oklahoma City). They had their own parties and such,” related a working-class bar patron who was regularly excluded from those affairs. In much the same way that southern men in Atlanta formed communities in the face of increased hostility, so too did gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City.⁷

With threats to one’s reputation or economic livelihood so close at hand, members of this subculture operated under a rather thick veil of secrecy. Ironically, because of this secrecy, it could be difficult for upper-middle-class gay men to explore the inner sanctum of same-sex socialization networks. Joe, a financial analyst for a large investment firm, spent much of his early adult life immersed in work as a way to avoid dealing with his sexuality. Joe frequently worked long hours and almost every weekend to avoid

⁷ For a discussion of how valuable private parties were to queer subculture formation, see David K. Johnson, “The Kids of Fairytown: Gay Male Culture on Chicago’s Near North Side in the 1930s,” in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, ed. Brett Beemyn (New York: Routledge Press, 1997), 112-113; J.L. Asher, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 9/10/2002; John Howard, “The Library, the Park, and the Pervert: Public Space and Homosexual Encounter in Post-World War II Atlanta,” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995): 166-187. Howard discusses the private world of entertaining that occurred in Atlanta in the face of increased hostility in the 1950s and religious intolerance. See especially footnote 50.

embarrassing questions about his marital status. When he finally mustered enough nerve to venture out into bars in the Oklahoma City area, he found it difficult to find others to socialize with, and was thwarted by colleagues at work:

There was another guy at work that must have known I was gay, and he always called me “Josie” or “Josephine.” He was the supervisor of the cost department and I hated to go in there. He would come up behind me and stick his finger in my ear. He was the same person as I was getting into my 40s that would (with a group of others) go up and down 39th street and patrol the gay bars’ parking lots looking for cars they recognized. I thought, this was the only way I could meet any gay people at all and they’ve got the parking lot staked out! I would have been fired or laid off if they knew for sure.⁸

Losing one’s livelihood was certainly a possibility if employers found out about an employee’s homosexuality, and that reality was obvious enough if a man was caught downtown in a tearoom or at a park engaged in a sexual act with another man, but from time to time local authorities went looking for suspected homosexuals. As Curtis Harris’s campaign against Oklahoma City teachers in 1966 illustrated, even being gay or bisexual provided grounds for termination. As members of the teaching profession, these men fell into a higher educational and social block than the majority of visible gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City. Their very public difficulties undoubtedly encouraged other gay and bisexual professionals to keep lower profiles. “In the 1960s, they were always dragging people out and closing things. I think they were naming people in the newspaper, and there was no way I would do that.”⁹

While the prospect of losing jobs or businesses forced many same-sex lovers to remain discreet, other gay and bisexual men narrowed the boundaries of their cultural and

⁸ Joe, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 3/14/2005.

⁹ Ibid.

sexual playground by choice. They simply preferred to live, work, and have sexual relationships with those they considered their social equals. Rex, a successful architect and interior design specialist, grew up near Northwest Twenty-Third and Villa in Oklahoma City in the 1940s. Although he was aware of certain bars and restaurants that were popular gay hangouts, he found plenty of possibilities for furtive sexual relationships all along his street at night with other friends. “There were sufficient enough partners that I didn’t seek out others, and I am something of a snob anyway, so I looked for people of my social standing or better, even somebody that could help my career,” Rex said.¹⁰ This is something Rex recognized and appreciated among members of “his group,” by the 1940s, and it is something another resident suggests continues unabated:

The gay community has been and still can be very classist. There are gay men who will go to the very chi-chi parties, and some will go to the bars too, but there are some gay men---and it isn’t about not being openly gay men---who just don’t go where the common folk go. They give and go to the nice parties in nice houses, and now they can have a membership to the Petroleum Club and go, and they can now belong to the symphony. They are not really forced to have to pretend. In a lot of ways in Oklahoma, there is a lot of acceptance of gay people. To some extent---and I think that I am the recipient of that too---we are accepted by well-intentioned, good, well-off straight people. It’s like, “I can be friendly with you, a gay person, because you are not like what I am afraid gay people are--you are better, you are different.”¹¹

A consequence of the separation of gay and bisexual men based on class was that high-profile men in positions of power were not outwardly gay. This deprived other gay and bisexual men of support and reinforced the notion that being queer was a liability.

“There were not any visible role models in my life that were gay and partnered, so I had

¹⁰ Rex Ball, interview by author, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1/14/2005.

¹¹ Paul Thompson, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 12/22/2004.

always associated it with unhappiness and persecution, and being alone. That was reinforced as an adult when most of the gays I knew were married as well.”¹²

In the 1960s, however, one powerful exception to this truism assumed a prominent role in Oklahoma City political and civic affairs, one who served as a valuable example for men struggling to express and accept their sexuality. Oklahoma City attorney, philanthropist, historian, and mayor, George Shirk, was not openly gay, by contemporary standards, but he was suspected of being a homosexual by many members of the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual community. Throughout the 1960s, George Shirk emerged as an anomaly in the sexual world of Oklahoma City. He was wealthy, powerful, and his private life -- beyond his sexuality -- was above reproach. Even his detractors respected his undying love for Oklahoma City. His career in Oklahoma City law and politics speaks to both the opportunities and liabilities that upper-class homosexuals faced.

George Henry Shirk was born in Oklahoma City on May 1, 1913, the first of four children to John and Carrie Hinderer Shirk. A prominent Oklahoma City attorney, John Shirk served the community on various boards and commissions and helped the new city prosper soon after his arrival from Indiana in 1903. Carrie was a kind, intelligent woman who fostered a sense of curiosity and intellectual passion in her son George that strongly influenced the rest of his life. George spent his childhood years in Oklahoma City, usually reading or playing sports. After graduating from Central High School, Shirk enrolled at the University of Oklahoma, where he studied law in order to follow in his father's footsteps. Shirk passed the Oklahoma Bar exam in 1936 and worked at his

¹² Rex Ball, interview by author, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1/14/2005.

father's firm, Shirk and Danner, becoming a respected attorney. George had been in the ROTC program while at OU, and when World War II broke out, he served overseas at the European Theater Organization headquarters. Shirk eventually became the youngest colonel ever promoted under Dwight Eisenhower.¹³

George Shirk's military service made him a much more confident, polished man. After he returned to the United States, Shirk set his sights on municipal law and government, where he spent much of the rest of his career, and also focused on his true love -- Oklahoma history. Shirk served on numerous government-sponsored citizen committees that did everything from propose solutions to Oklahoma City's water supply crises of the 1950s, to amend the deficiencies in the salaries of city employees. His penchant for professional ethics and civic-mindedness cultivated a sterling reputation among residents in Oklahoma City, and he was a man in high demand by political and social societies.

It was widely rumored in the Oklahoma City gay male world, and suspected by some in the community at large, that George Shirk was gay. Howard Meredith and Mary Ellen Meredith note that during the summer of 1934 when Shirk toiled as an intern at his father's law firm in Oklahoma City, he seemed "particularly smitten with Marjorie Trapp and Phoebe Larrimore."¹⁴ At 21 years of age that summer, perhaps George was trying on the suit of responsibility and respectability laid out by his father and other members of his social standing, assuming that his destiny included marriage and heterosexuality.

¹³ Howard Meredith and Mary Ellen Meredith, *Mr. Oklahoma History: The Life of George H. Shirk* (Oklahoma City: Western Heritage Association Books, 1982), 9-50.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25. This information came directly from one of Shirk's diaries.

Shirk's sister, Lucyl, lived with her brother virtually her entire life and felt that her brother, if he was gay, hid that aspect of his life very well. She also related that it would never have occurred to her family to be disturbed by Shirk's homosexuality, as they were always so proud of George and his achievements.¹⁵

Whether he was gay or bisexual, or ever identified his sexuality in those terms, George Shirk apparently had sexual relationships with men throughout his adult life.¹⁶ At what point Shirk first realized his alternative sexual appetite is unknown, but his years at the University of Oklahoma as an undergraduate and law student likely provided him the freedom to pursue romantic relationships that would be impossible at home with his family on Thirteenth Street in Oklahoma City. In fact, Shirk made a number of important, life-long male friends at OU. Whether George was romantically linked to any of these men is unknown, but the untimely death of Hamilton DeMeules in the spring of 1936 deeply affected him. He and "Ham" had been terribly close during their stay at OU, belonging to the same legal fraternities, social clubs, and sporting groups. On the day Ham died, Shirk wrote in his diary that:

Allen called at 9:15 and said that Ham had passed on at 8:30 this morning. A rather dreary day for us---*tempus onrnes sed memorias sapit*—at 10:00 Allen and I went to the city and watched the board for awhile. At lunch with Father at the Biltmore. I could not watch the figures at all.¹⁷

¹⁵ Lucyl Shirk, telephone conversation with author, 1/21/2006.

¹⁶ Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005; Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/6/2005; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004; Joseph Kirk, email interview by author, 1/12/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 7/3/2005.

¹⁷ Meredith, *Mr. Oklahoma History*, 28. Here find a reprint of George Shirk's diary entry, 3/19/1936.

Given his social position, education, and wealth, Shirk's family expected him to assume a prominent role in Oklahoma City civic affairs. He did this with ease, entertaining and being seen at all of the posh upper-class hangouts around. Many of these functions were coed, which would be somewhat problematic for Shirk if he indeed was gay. Perhaps it was for this reason that in 1938 George and fellow bachelor friends started a group called the Bachelor's Club. The Bachelor's Club was by definition a men's fraternal organization dedicated to civic responsibility and social obligations. Membership was by invitation only, open to those who had never married, and the Bachelors' Club catered to the highest society members in Oklahoma City. The group sponsored social functions throughout the season at the Skirvin Towers, the Oklahoma Golf and Country Club, and the Beacon Club. Some early famous members included oilman Tom Slick, Jr., publisher Edward L. Gaylord, philanthropist William Hefner, attorney Fred Dunlevy, founding partner of Crowe and Dunlevy, and Charles Urschel, an Oklahoma City businessman kidnapped by George "Machine Gun" Kelley only a few years earlier.¹⁸

One of the enduring events sponsored by the Bachelor's Club was the annual Debutante Party held at Christmas, where members introduced the daughters of influential Oklahoma City Brahmins to society.¹⁹ The first ball was held in 1946, shortly after George Shirk returned from World War II, and all of the proceeds from the lavish

¹⁸ "Bachelors' Club Will Give Gala Dinner Dance Tonight," *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/28/1938, 4; For a complete discussion of Urschel's kidnapping and subsequent role in bringing Kelley down, see Stanley Hamilton, *Machine Gun Kelley's Last Stand* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Meredith, *Mr. Oklahoma History*, 34-35, 56.

affair went to local charities. As was customary when George was an officer of the organization, he served as emcee of the event, and according to his sister Lucyl Shirk, George adored the pomp and pageantry associated with the event:

He enjoyed himself doing this, and he had a sort of flair when he presented those debs. Of course, back then it was far different from what it is now. George's ability to do this kind of thing just came naturally to him. How he acquired the skill to do it I'll never know. He wasn't particularly social minded in college. He wasn't the "Joe College" type at dances. But he had a manner about him, and he did everything with a flourish. He personally took great enjoyment from presenting those girls at the Christmas party.²⁰

The Bachelors' Club by all appearances was an elitist singles organization that sponsored social events where men and women of higher social standing could socialize and possibly marry. Indeed, the engagement announcements in the *Daily Oklahoman* for years after the Bachelor's Club's founding made mention of the grooms' membership in the organization.²¹ Most members of the Bachelor's Club were probably heterosexual, but portions were bisexual and homosexual. "The whole crowd at my level in Oklahoma had male experiences, starting at the Bachelors Club, and I was aware of that," related Rex Ball. "No one was 'out,' then or now as far as I know. Nevertheless many of its members have never married and others married out of sexual ignorance."²² It might be said, then, that the Bachelor's Club was a popular organization for wealthier or upper-class gay men, but remained a predominantly straight club that some gay men happened to fall into for sociocultural reasons.

²⁰ Ibid., 35.

²¹ A similar social organization for upwardly mobile ladies in Oklahoma City was known as the French Heels Club.

²² Rex Ball, interview by author, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1/14/2005 and 3/9/2005.

George Shirk was the organization's first president, and its membership included several of his close friends, many of whom were closeted homosexual men of power in Oklahoma City. In a way, the Bachelor's Club eased the transition for some upper-class and elite men into a more openly gay lifestyle. The club gave men a legitimate excuse to meet, travel together, and socialize in an atmosphere that might be devoid of women without raising suspicion. Members completed numerous business transactions at meetings, and the convenience for a sexual hookup would seem obvious. That one of the organization's keynote fundraisers was a debutante ball -- where all of the girls were both underage and of no interest to some members -- provided a convenient shield against community questions as well.

When he was not working to preserve some part of Oklahoma City history or traveling across the state documenting historic sites with good friend Muriel Wright, George Shirk spent most of his free time at his secluded country estate near Lake Aluma. Shirk purchased the fourteen acres just east of Oklahoma City off of Northeast Fiftieth Street in the late 1930s and soon set about to build an authentic one-room pioneer cabin. Shirk shipped logs in from Arkansas and oversaw every aspect of construction, and he built a swimming pool with his own hands, complete with a clever cistern system to keep it full. Here, George loved to entertain friends and companions whenever possible. Ed Vaught and Ed Oppenheim, Bachelor Club friends from college, frequently shared host duties with George. Since the home was rather secluded, Shirk climbed atop the windmill that supplied his home with water and hung a railroad lantern to serve as a beacon for approaching guests. Cars would be lined up the dirt road for hundreds of yards. Years later, Shirk built a huge home in front of the cabin that he shared with his

aged mother and sister, Lucyl. Shirk divided the spacious home into two wings---his section was on one end, complete with a huge bedroom and office, while his mother Carrie and sister Lucyl shared the other section.²³

In 1964, George Shirk's life took an important turn when the Association for Responsible Government (ARG) persuaded him to become mayor of Oklahoma City. The ARG was a citizen advisory group founded in 1962 to sponsor candidates and campaign for city reforms. The group formed in response to a myriad of disagreements and inaction that city leaders exhibited over impending fiscal and infrastructure crises. They successfully placed four candidates and the mayor on the Oklahoma City Council by 1964, with four holdover council members from the previous administration. As a result, they concluded very little business and tension among council members remained high throughout the summer. That constant tension caused newly-elected Mayor Jack Wilkes to resign in June of 1964. This vacancy left the eight-member Oklahoma City Council deadlocked and unable to function. At the request of the ARG, George Shirk agreed to fill in, and he was a perfect choice: someone known as a capable, disciplined peacemaker who pursued win-win situations for all parties involved.²⁴

Edward L. Gaylord, owner and editor of the *Daily Oklahoman*, called the move a "welcome solution," describing George Shirk as a qualified civic leader who should help get city business back on track. That assessment was correct. Shirk, as president of the Oklahoma Historical Society, had connections all over the state, and his love of

²³ Meredith, *Mr. Oklahoma History*, 33-34.

²⁴ "Support Reportedly Lined Up to Appoint George Shirk Mayor," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/16/1964, 1; Meredith, *Mister Oklahoma History*, 90-94; "Citizen to Mayor In Three Minutes," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/17/1964.

Oklahoma City was well known. He had some expertise with the intricacies of city planning and organization as well, having served on a citizen advisory board that helped draft the city charter in 1957. Gaylord was polite enough to Shirk in the editorial, which he used to set the council's agenda---“adequate municipal funding is a first necessity, of course. Other pressing matters are metropolitan planning and urban renewal”---but he made what to anyone in the know would consider a swipe at Shirk, referring to him as “the 51-year old bachelor mayor.”²⁵

Shirk immediately became Oklahoma City's most visible public official, making daily radio appearances and speaking engagements at civic club banquets, where he encouraged residents to think long-term and in new ways about Oklahoma City's problems. Between 1959 and 1964 alone, city fathers annexed almost 400 square miles into city limits, an increase from eighty square miles, which severely taxed outdated sewer, water, electrical, and public transit systems. At City Hall, Mayor Shirk smoothed some ruffled feathers among the “gang of four” -- those not elected on the ARG platform of 1964 -- by voting with them on how to best utilize federal money for acquiring right-of-ways.²⁶ Shirk also dealt with urban renewal, a controversial issue that a lack of funding had stalled since 1961. Shirk campaigned hard for the Pei Plan, as the master revitalization blueprint for downtown Oklahoma City was called, and he convinced Oklahoma City residents to support a sales tax increase to fund the plan. When it passed, Shirk proudly claimed that “This is an endorsement of the present city administration. It heralds a new era for the first time since statehood when the local

²⁵ *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/17/1964, 18.

²⁶ Meredith, *Mr. Oklahoma History*, 90-94.

government can be adequately financed and increase its services.”²⁷ By 1965 when he sought reelection, George H. Shirk had gained a reputation as one of the finest executives ever to serve Oklahoma City. The *Tulsa Tribune*, fresh off the sales tax victory, hailed him, noting that “much of the city’s self-defeating attitude of the past was smothered by Mayor George Shirk, the first outstanding municipal leader there in a generation.”²⁸

The world was George Shirk’s pearl by the mid-1960s. He was a very well-respected member of the Oklahoma City social and political world, he was a popular mayor of the capital city, and he was able to live a semi-openly gay life at a time when this would seem unthinkable in Oklahoma. Many gay and bisexual men marveled that Shirk juggled all of these roles and remained above reproach in the public’s eye. Part of this stemmed from the fact that his professional life was enviable and he remained a tireless champion of Oklahoma City, both of which gave Shirk the benefit of the doubt among city residents curious about his sustained bachelorhood. George played coy with women, too. In an interview with Mary Jo Nelson of the *Oklahoma City Times* shortly before he became mayor, Shirk noted that “the looks don’t count as much...If you can find a woman who would try to see your point of view as much as you strive to see hers, then someone who could bring that to a union would be worth having.”²⁹ The fact that he cultivated the illusion that he was eligible, that he was heterosexual, suggests that being a queer politician was not possible in Oklahoma City in the 1960s, at least one who acknowledged his homosexuality. Some within the straight community knew of George

²⁷ Ibid., 103-127; *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/10/1965.

²⁸ *Tulsa Tribune*, 11/10/1965.

²⁹ “Leap Year Bachelor Supply Good.” *Oklahoma City Times*, 1/21/1960.

Shirk's sexuality anyway. One Oklahoma City resident remembers being within earshot when the police chief scolded several officers who were heavily-policing and threatening to shut down some downtown gay bars. The chief warned them to "be careful, or our dear mayor won't have any place to socialize!"³⁰

George Shirk continued to use his country home to entertain handsome young men away from prying eyes, even after he became the mayor of Oklahoma City. Paul Thompson remembers that "George Shirk was the worst kept secret in Oklahoma City. He had a place in the country, was very wealthy, very well-connected, and to me as obvious as a train wreck. He kept a lot of sixteen- and eighteen-year-old muscular young men who worked and lived at his place. He went completely nelly when Carol Channing came to Oklahoma City with *Hello Dolly* for the first time---and it was captured on the 6:00 news."³¹ In addition to peddling his famous steak and spaghetti dinner to friends and acquaintances, Shirk occasionally entertained celebrities. One party in particular was memorable because author Truman Capote was a guest. Apparently, several wealthy gay men in Oklahoma City knew Capote and arranged for Shirk to play host at his estate. Capote stopped by – late according to guests -- and immediately made the rounds charming those present with his wit and party demeanor. Mayor Shirk was not as impressed, and apparently the evening ended on a sour note:

George Shirk...was gayer than a three dollar bill. He's mayor, and Truman Capote, who was in Kansas, had just finished writing *In Cold Blood*. Truman was on his way to New Orleans. He had gotten the manuscript off and it was party time. For some reason he stopped here...George Shirk was an extremely hairy

³⁰ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 4/17/2005.

³¹ Paul Thompson, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 12/22/2004; *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/4/1966. Channing came with the *Hello Dolly* troupe to Oklahoma City in 1966, staying for several performances of the mega-hit show.

man, and like a lot of people who are very hairy, he was a little flinchy on the subject. So, one of his gay nicknames, which you never used to his face unless you wanted to be slapped upside the head--George was not a bashful kind of fairy---was "Gorilla Mary." Entirely appropriate if he was sans shirt! Well, he was out there in a fairly brief pair of trunks, and by this time Truman had had too many martinis and said something about "Oh, it's Gorilla Mary." Shirk, who had also had a martini or two himself, picked Truman up and threw him in the pool. And that was the end of the party.³²

Although George Shirk was not openly gay by today's standards, his sexuality was obvious to a large number of gay men in Oklahoma City since the 1940s. Shirk had life-long friendships with other "confirmed bachelors," people of his social standing and education in Oklahoma, who spent their entire lives socializing in private, taking extended vacations together, and entertaining in a grand way. Shirk also had overtly gay relationships with men in Oklahoma City. According to some residents, one of George Shirk's long-time lovers was Wendell Howell, a young law student when he met Shirk in the early 1960s, who was thirty years younger than the Mayor. Affectionately known as "Gorilla Mary and the First Lady" among the gay community, George and Wendell shared much in common.³³ Both were avid Civil War collectors and history buffs, both were lawyers, both were politically astute and experienced, as Howell ran for House District 90 seat in 1964, and both had an innate intellectual curiosity that drove them to read voraciously and explore the world around them. According to Shirk's sister, Lucyl, George mentored Howell and felt some responsibility to steer him into more productive

³² Ralph Prevette, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 2/19/2005; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

³³ Bill Rogers, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 9/18/2004; Joe, interview by author, 3/14/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/26/2005; Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005; Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004

pursuits. Once George Shirk became mayor, he relied on Wendell's advice and diplomacy to run Oklahoma City, making him an administrative assistant on a number of committees.³⁴

As perfectly matched as Wendell and George seemed on the surface, their relationship was turbulent. Wendell frequently had affairs according to one confidant, and he had several brushes with the law regarding DUI arrests, but George was not a model partner either.³⁵ At some point, Wendell lost his military deferment and was drafted and sent to Vietnam for a year. George apparently saw his commitment to Wendell in decidedly less esteem than anyone assumed, as he started seeing Wendell's younger brother, Scott. This was a volatile situation from the beginning according to one of the Howell brothers' acquaintances: "Scotty was perfectly presentable as long as he was sober. Scotty had to mix drugs with drink before he got out of line. Wendell on the other hand was as crazy as a shit-house rat, before he went to Nam, and he came back worse. They committed indiscretion upon indiscretion, and the cops were called time and again."³⁶ Things became especially acute when Wendell returned from the armed forces and Scott refused to give up his place at Shirk's side. One of the most notorious incidents occurred in May of 1967, when the Oklahoma City police arrested Scott after he fired off a few rounds from an old 45 caliber gun he "borrowed" from George Shirk.

³⁴ Lucyl Shirk, telephone interview by author, 1/21/2006; "Nine New Politicians Enter Race," *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/22/1964, 33; "Shirk Rounds Out Bond Committee," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/3/1964, 3; Wendell Howell served on Oklahoma City's citizens advisory committee on public improvement. He also managed a local theater chain.

³⁵ Earnest, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 3/27/2005; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 2/19/2005.

³⁶ Ralph Prevette, follow-up interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/12/2005.

After leaving Lee' Lounge, a notorious Oklahoma City gay club, a drunken Scott and a couple of teenage boys shot at some buildings near Twenty-seventh and Robinson.³⁷

When contacted by police, Shirk refused to press charges. The *Daily Oklahoman* ran a story about the incident in which Shirk admitted that Scott lived at his estate. It was probably a very embarrassing public exposure for a man that rather successfully kept his sexuality out of the public eye.

With events involving the Howell brothers coming to a head, and the tenure of Curtis Harris as Oklahoma County Attorney just starting, George Shirk likely grew weary of trying to keep his private life out of the public sphere. Some speculated that Shirk entertained notions of running for governor or possibly United States senator at one point, so his stint as mayor would be a stepping stone toward that goal, although his sister denies that George ever intended to run for any political office. According to those who knew George, even superficially, it was widely believed that local politicians forced Shirk out of office. The story goes that well-connected and powerful city officials invited Shirk to a business lunch, where they presented the mayor with a file folder containing damaging personal information – about his sexuality and the Howell brothers -- that would be leaked should Shirk run for office again.³⁸ Certainly, there were prominent

³⁷ "Suspect Held In Shooting," *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/24/1967, 19; Both of the Howell brothers led short, troubled lives. Scott was arrested numerous times for DUI, and killed a passenger in his vehicle during a collision in 1988. Murder charges were eventually dropped, and Scott moved to Florida, where he died in 1994. Wendell also faced felony DUI and assault charges in Oklahoma County. He was killed in an ATM robbery in 1994 at the age of 51. See "Man Blamed for Death," *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/24/1988, 3, and *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/27/1994, 18.

³⁸ Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005; Lucyl Shirk, telephone conversation, 1/21/2006; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Lance, interview by author,

residents who weighed in on Shirk's future. In January of 1967 at a chamber of commerce luncheon, Edward Gaylord was asked to introduce Shirk to the group. He went so far as to tell those gathered that Shirk would not run again, but that his tenure was successful and Shirk was a "great" mayor. Shirk quickly replied that he needed to attend to his law practice, but that he still had not made up his mind about running again, as many people were urging him to remain mayor.³⁹ Ultimately, Gaylord's prediction came true, as George Shirk announced several weeks later that he would not seek reelection when his term expired. At a televised news conference in his office, Shirk cited the demands of his law practice as the primary reason for not running again. In an interesting sidebar, four councilmen, all original members of the Association for Responsible Government that drafted Shirk to become mayor, also announced at the news conference their intentions to return to private life.⁴⁰ Perhaps this was merely a coincidence, or perhaps it indicates that Shirk was forced from office and this amounted to a peaceful protest of Shirk's removal. In any event, one of Oklahoma City's finest and most successful mayors ended his political career in 1967, and the gay and bisexual male world lost a powerful – albeit circumspect – queer public servant.

While George Shirk represented what for the time was the most openly gay public official in Oklahoma City, there were other extremely high-profile people who kept their sexuality hidden from the public at all costs. These were men with aspirations of state

1/11/2005; Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005; Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

³⁹ "Mayor Shirk's Still Undecided," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/28/1967, 8.

⁴⁰ "Four Councilmen, Mayor Won't Run," *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/2/1967, 1.

and national office, and they were extremely careful. They were, however, known among the gay community, and in some cases reckless when among other gay and lesbian residents. These included senators, governors, media magnates, oil tycoons, physicians, and many wealthy self-employed businessmen in Oklahoma City. Their presence at private parties and occasionally even the Mayflower, was a confidence boost to other gay and bisexual men, many of whom were deeply closeted. The Pink Tea Queens' reputations also protected other gay men who ran in their entourage, as outing a well-connected public official could cost people their jobs in the police department, the county attorneys' office, or the newspaper.

It was all over Oklahoma City throughout the 1940s that a local media magnate was either gay or bisexual. Regularly appearing at Bishop's Tap Room in the evening, this wealthy Oklahoma City Brahmin regularly danced on the bar with other patrons and left with willing sexual partners on each arm. His parents were evidently concerned enough with their son's behavior that they sent him back east for a time.⁴¹ He returned after some months and married, fathering several children, and became a strong proponent of conservative Christianity and moral reform.

Also in that circle was Walter Powell, long-time Oklahoma City municipal attorney. The son of a prominent local judge, Powell attended the University of Oklahoma law school, passed the bar in 1953, and took a job as Assistant Municipal Counselor for Oklahoma City in 1954. He served as principal counsel to Mayor Shirk and his successors, city department heads, and the City Council in that capacity until his death in 1984. Like George Shirk, Walter Powell joined the Bachelor's Club and served

⁴¹ GJP, interview by author, 3/19/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

three terms as the organization's president. He shared George's love of preservation and history, as he also participated on the Heritage Hills Preservation Trust, and he also helped raise money for the Oklahoma City Opera Association and medical research.

Wealth, power, and status meant that many closeted gay and bisexual men had the means to travel from Oklahoma City on a regular basis and express their sexuality elsewhere. Walter Powell represented a portion of elite gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City that did just that: "As it happens Walter Powell and I were fraternity brothers and roommates at OU. He was VERY closeted and pretty much confined his gay activities to out-of-town trips. I am told that he married late in his life and he perhaps considered himself bisexual," remembers Bill Rogers.⁴² Long-time bartender Ralph Prevette acknowledges that wealth and class made traveling for sex a luxury for most residents, but a necessity for the pink tea queen set. "In any given town, the rich queers always find one another, and in a town like Oklahoma City it was very easy. They did not want to be publicly queer, especially in those days, but they had similar interests and a lot of money and power---either politically or the power that money gives you. When they entertained, they did so privately. Once you meet one member of a clique, you usually end up meeting them all, but they do their entertaining elsewhere."⁴³

⁴² Rex Ball, interview by author, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1/14/2005; Bill Rogers, email follow-up interview by author, Oklahoma City, 3/2/2005; "City Lawyer Dies at 55," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/9/1984, 23; See also Walter Powell's obituary, *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/11/1984, 112. In an article on the Bachelor's Club, debutante ball coordinator Judy Lehmbeck stated that Powell married, which made him an alumni member. An annual award bearing his name is given to a lucky alumni member. See "Bachelors Club Honors Alumnus." *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/1/2006, 1E-2E.

⁴³ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 2/19/2005.

Other prominent Oklahoma City gay and bisexual men risked exposure by socializing in grand style right here. One political stalwart from central Oklahoma was very gay, and also very closeted, but before becoming Oklahoma's chief executive this man hosted fabulous parties at his home and entertained in drag. He shared a lover with one Oklahoma City resident, who described him as jealous, vicious, and well-endowed.⁴⁴ To members of the gay community in Oklahoma City, his eventual political image makeover, replete with wife and children, was a joke, especially when his wife had a less than sterling reputation of her own:

I remember when I was in high school, (him) coming and doing an assembly--- one of those pride kind of things. He had been in education for a very short while and from what I understood was a "chicken hawk," but they wanted to groom him for political purposes here. One thing he obviously needed was a wife, and (he) was quite obviously never going to get one on his own. So, (his wife) had reached about the end of her youth as a hooker, and it was an arrangement---she got to be married and respectable...she had some kids by him. He had a wife and kids and (was considered) respectable.⁴⁵

The Oklahoma City community would be shocked to learn that many of these powerful men, some of whom were staunch opponents of homosexuals, were actually notorious members of that subculture, but that was not unusual for members of this class. Although wealthy, the loss of social standing and respect among peers proved sufficient enough motivation to live a lie. And while the elite members of the gay community in Oklahoma City socialized privately and among their own station, they were never completely removed from the more overtly gay institutions in Oklahoma City. Many gay and bisexual powerbrokers made their way to the Mayflower and other bars, if only

⁴⁴ Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

⁴⁵ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005.

to take a peek.⁴⁶ They were not welcome, however, an indication that class bias extended up the social scale as well as down in Oklahoma City.

Back when I first got here, the pink tea queens didn't go to the bars, unless it was late after a party or something to see what the peasants were doing. They were roundly despised by the peasants and rightly so! There is definitely a class distinction---they had money, and some had social pretensions, but it was mainly money.⁴⁷

The danger posed by the public exposure of one's sexuality in Oklahoma would seem obvious. Even the unsubstantiated charge of being gay or bisexual could derail careers and change the course of politics, as the career of George Shirk likely indicates. Another high profile example of how Oklahomans treated homosexuality involved a 1978 United States Senate race, during which charges of homosexuality, corruption, and blackmail made for an ugly end to a campaign that was never really in doubt. It is instructive, however, as to why many gay and bisexual men of status preferred to remain closeted to all but their closest associates, and how the Oklahoma City community reacted to and processed the information. On the whole, that reaction suggests that a political or prominent person's sexuality was less important to their success than their relationship to the primary organ of political power -- the *Daily Oklahoman*.

David Boren was the youngest man ever elected governor of the state of Oklahoma. Originally from Seminole, Oklahoma, Boren was bright, capable, and by any account an honest man who came from a politically astute and connected family. His father, Lyle, served as an Oklahoma state representative from Seminole during the Great Depression. Boren was a Rhodes Scholar at the University of Oklahoma and after

⁴⁶ Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005.

⁴⁷ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005.

returning from England, studied law at his alma mater and prepared for a life in politics. In 1974, at the age of thirty seven, David Boren unseated Democratic incumbent Governor David Hall in the primary and eventually gained over sixty percent of all votes cast against Republican James Inhofe the following November. This was no small feat, as the relatively unknown Democrat ran at a time when Oklahoma was swiftly becoming a more fertile ground for Republican candidates, its history notwithstanding.⁴⁸

In 1978, Boren was seeking the office of United States Senator from Oklahoma. He along with long-time Oklahoma City defense attorney and state senator Grover Miskovsky, state congressman Gene Stipe from McAlester, and several other minor candidates sought the Democratic nomination. The governor was considered the front-runner against Stipe, with Miskovsky trailing both men. Miskovsky, then in his mid-seventies, was a fiery opponent, a veteran of Oklahoma City politics and not afraid to sling mud. In August of 1978, just three months prior to the election, Miskovsky dropped a bombshell at a press conference when he told reporters of a letter he wrote Boren charging that the governor was a homosexual. Another candidate in the race, Anthony Points, made the allegations at a Democratic women's club meeting in El Reno. Points distributed a pamphlet that said "There is a side of David Boren that is a known fact in legal and political circles, and that's the fact David Boren frequents with homosexuals, and I'm putting it lightly." Miskovsky pounced on the allegations, which appeared only a few weeks before the primary election, and wrote an open letter to the

⁴⁸ James Ralph Scales and Danney Goble, *Oklahoma Politics: A History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 335-337, 344.

governor asking if he was gay or bisexual, or had ever engaged in gay or bisexual behavior.⁴⁹

These highly-publicized allegations stunned political observers, and the whole incident was steeped in religious bigotry and eerily reminiscent of the politics of the 1950s. Points claimed to have photographs and affidavits from people supporting his allegations, although he failed to produce them when pressed by reporters because he feared that Governor Boren's political machine would buy off the witnesses if he exposed them. Points told reporters that the information on Governor Boren's sexuality came to light following a two-year investigation into homosexuality in Oklahoma, completed by a thirty-member staff he directed, that included surveillance and infiltration of private social gatherings. Ferreting out homosexuals was an all-consuming passion for Points, who freely acknowledged his position: "As a Christian, I believe that Jesus Christ was not a queer and that the devil is a queer. People have the right to choose right from wrong." Besides details regarding the Governor's sexuality, Points found that forty percent of state employees were homosexual, and half of Oklahoma's teachers were gay as well. Points offered no proof on these allegations, either. Points believed that gays were "threats to national security" because their sexual preference made them subject to blackmail, an argument that could have spewed from the mouths of Joseph McCarthy or Roy Cohn two decades earlier.⁵⁰

Naturally, Boren called the allegations outrageous and politically motivated, a correct assumption by all accounts. Miskovsky owned a reputation for being a tenacious

⁴⁹ "Sex Charge a Lie, Gov. Boren Replies," *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/11/1978, 1.

⁵⁰ "Points Claims He Has 'Proof'," *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/12/1978, 48.

defense lawyer, and he made a number of county attorneys and judges furious with his courtroom theatrics, and his candidacy was faltering. In addition, Points assured other minor candidates in the race of their defeat, and that they should endorse another candidate. He made his allegations about Boren to them, and apparently they ignored him. The timing of the allegations and the lack of evidence Points cited seriously challenged his credibility and made the whole episode look suspicious.

Such allegations had been leveled at Boren before, however. Gossip swirled about the state capital for some time about the governor's personal life and his sexuality. Boren's divorce from his first wife, during his first year as governor, reignited the rumors, and his subsequent remarriage to Molly Shi, daughter of a pioneer Indian Territory family, did not serve to quiet the talk, either.⁵¹ Wild rumors of gay parties at the governor's mansion and the police finding Boren in compromising positions with other men circulated in Oklahoma City throughout his term in office.⁵²

Boren did receive support from an unlikely source, given their penchant for publishing the names of people engaging in any kind of homosexual behavior -- the editorial page at the *Daily Oklahoman*. An editorial ran the day after Boren responded to Miskovsky's allegations that called his words "despicable and stupid." The *Oklahoman* left little doubt that Miskovsky hoped to resurrect his faltering political ambitions by making allegations that were impossible to prove: "So what does an aging ex-politician,

⁵¹ Lance, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 1/11/2005. Molly Shi's sister, Bessie Jane Shi, was a regular at the Mayflower Lounge where she entertained on the piano. According to the "conspiracy theorists" who believe Boren is a closeted homosexual, the Shi marriage was one for convenience and appearances. They married in November 1977 at the governor's mansion, and shortly after Boren became a candidate for Senator.

⁵² Ibid.; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 4/17/2005.

hungry for the limelight again, do in a situation like this? More often than not, he goes to the old mudball.” The newspaper’s support of Boren was unprecedented, given the charges of immorality that he faced. Jim Standard, managing editor of the *Daily Oklahoman*, had heard rumors about Boren’s sexuality since 1974. Apparently, the newspaper tried to investigate the allegations but “couldn’t track anyone down.” He discussed the rumors with the governor personally in 1976 while on a trip with him to Korea. Boren denied the charges then and worried that they might be used in a political campaign against him. Satisfied with Boren’s answer, Standard ignored the charges made by Points until Miskovsky made them public, reasoning that they were “nonsense” and Points was unreliable.⁵³ Standard could easily have kept the story alive and thoroughly investigated the matter on his own, but he chose to drop it instead. “We are not in the business of publishing rumours,” he said. The editorial response was unusual to say the least, especially since other homosexuals -- teachers for instance -- received a great deal of grief from the newspaper throughout 1978 and beyond.⁵⁴

The fallout from the Boren allegations proved less spectacular than any side imagined. Grover Miskovsky and Anthony Points filed multi-million dollar libel suits against OPUBCO, the corporate organ that owned the *Daily Oklahoman*, for the editorials and articles that followed Miskovsky’s press conference. Neither successfully proved the charge, nor at no time did Points provide investigators, journalists, or

⁵³ *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/11/1978, 10; “Boren Privately Denied Rumor in ’76, Editor Says,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/24/1979, 6.

⁵⁴ Standard’s quote taken from “Boren Privately Denied Rumor in ’76, Editor Says,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/24/1979, 6. See chapter seven for details of the Helm Bill and the *Daily Oklahoman*’s coverage.

attorneys with the iron-clad “proof” he gathered about Boren.⁵⁵ More charges of homosexuality followed Boren in 1980, when the owner of a mental health organization in Oklahoma alleged that Boren initiated a federal investigation against his business in retaliation for leaking information about Boren’s sexuality.⁵⁶ None of the allegations hurt Boren’s career, as he served three terms as United States Senator before returning to Norman to become president of the University of Oklahoma in 1994. Boren received the benefit of the doubt because he was twice married, fathered children, and had not been involved in a publicly-proven indiscretion.

The public debate about David Boren’s sexuality, and the unseemly way that charges could be made, might suggest why the wealthy, public officials, and people with aspirations for state and national office remained closeted in Oklahoma City until only recently. The Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male subculture was separated by class, both out of necessity and by design. Through a series of private parties, civic affairs, fraternal organizations, and interstate travel, well-connected men enjoyed a sexual and social world that remained distinct from the working-class arena of bars and drag balls. Some residents chose to socialize privately and run with their own set; others did so to avoid detection and embarrassing questions. A surprising number of Oklahoma governors, senators, district attorneys, lawyers, judges, police chiefs, and media members made up the Pink Tea Queen set, most of whom successfully concealed their sexuality

⁵⁵ “Points Limits Answers,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/25/1979, 1.

⁵⁶ “Barkouras Aides Say Some ‘Foes’ Are Homosexual,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/4/1980, 1. Barkouras owned a counseling facility that was under investigation by the federal government. He believed the investigation was initiated by Boren after several of Barkouras’ aides made allegations regarding Boren’s sexuality.

from a large majority of residents. Others, like George Shirk, were less closeted but were still able to build enviable reputations and careers. The class divisions within the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual subculture were real, however, and they went a long way in determining how residents expressed their sexuality and, in turn, how the community responded to those expressions.

Chapter VII
The Helms Bill, OHR, and
the Politicization of the Oklahoma City Gay Male World, 1970-1989

The 1970s were important years in the development of a political consciousness in LGBT communities all across the United States. The growth of the New Right, which accelerated as a consequence of the perceived excesses of the Civil Rights era and Vietnam-era protests, meant that a highly motivated and well-funded group of politicians began to dominate state and local politics. 1968 was a watershed year in this development, as in its first months the Tet offensive reenergized the debate over American involvement in Vietnam, assassins murdered Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy, and protesters rocked the Democratic national convention in Chicago. Conservatives took advantage of the apparent chaos in American social, political, and cultural arenas – and the decline of the New Deal Democratic coalitions -- and parlayed that discontent into a grass-roots counter counter-culture movement, one that arguably continues unabated.¹ Preserving the traditional family structure emerged as a major element of the New Right agenda, which made gay and lesbian Americans easy targets.

¹ Literature on this phenomenon is plentiful. On events in the 1960s generally and 1968 in particular, see David Caute, *The Year of the Barricades: A Journey Through 1968* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990) and William Henry Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. 5th ed. (New York: Oxford Press, 2003). David Burner's synthesis, *Making Peace With the 1960s* (Princeton: University Press, 1996), is also excellent. See Alan Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in*

The growth of gay and lesbian activism paralleled the emergence of the New Right, and nothing signaled the degree of resistance quite like the Stonewall Rebellion. On June 27, 1969, at the Greenwich Village gay bar, the Stonewall Inn, the Manhattan police department once again attempted to intimidate and shake down bar patrons. This occurred regularly according to Greenwich Village residents, but the mayor faced reelection in 1969 and wanted to appear tough on crime and vice, so the abuse became more acute. As officers led angry patrons from the establishment, they formed a crowd outside the bar, one that was more militant and motivated than ever before, and they attacked officers who attempted to arrest several female impersonators and the bartender. Bottles flew, fires raged, and protestors eventually forced authorities to rescue the police from the surrounded enclave. All night long protests ripped through Greenwich Village, as emboldened homosexuals unleashed a torrent of frustration on the community that had for too long ignored their plight. "Gay power" were the watchwords in gay communities all across the United States.²

the 1960s (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1984) for a discussion regarding the retreat of American liberalism. For Matusow, that retreat and the 1960s war on poverty were the era's biggest failures. Following the 1968 election, the liberal coalition fell apart and its intellectuals froze, having sold out after their cherished projects -- Vietnam, Great Society -- proved fruitless for Matusow, causing social cohesion to decline and America began to "unravel." Mary Brennan discusses the concurrent takeover of the Republican Party by conservative ideologues in *Turning Right in the 1960s: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). For Brennan, the central irony of 1960s history was the rise of a new conservatism, embodied in the 1964 nomination of Barry Goldwater for president that generated a right-wing populism characterized by law/order, "family values," and love of country. Ultimately, the Right was more successful than at exploiting discontent and grassroots activism.

² John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 ed.), 220-239.

Historians argue that the significance of the Stonewall Rebellion was more complex than Americans perceived at that juncture. Although usually credited with starting the gay rights movement, and for bringing significant increases to the number of rank and file members of protest organizations, the leadership of the movement was decidedly old-school. The Gay Liberation Front and other political organizations that developed post-Stonewall took advantage of the many years of organizational expertise and experience provided by activists from the so-called Homophile Movement. Homophiles worked diligently throughout the 1950s and beyond to demystify homosexuals and their lifestyle. They illustrated that homosexuals were good employees, talented, creative, and intelligent people who merely wanted to live their lives with as much respect and dignity as heterosexual Americans. Taking advantage of declining taboos regarding the portrayal of sexuality in film and the media in general, and the discussion of homosexuality in particular, activists in Washington, D.C., San Francisco, New York, and Los Angeles parlayed the Stonewall event into a national coming out party for larger, well-established gay communities in major cities.³

Stonewall did not, however, translate into immediate political activism in Oklahoma City. “We were very aware of Stonewall. It probably raised the consciousness level, but there was no direct action that I am aware. Getting people energized in the gay movement is very difficult--they don’t do anything until they’re

³ John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 318-321. The best single account of Stonewall, complete with participant biographies and perspectives, is Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Plume Press, 1994); D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 233-235.

threatened,” related longtime Oklahoma City attorney and activist Bill Rogers.⁴ That is probably a fair characterization of the level of politicization of the Oklahoma City gay male world until the late 1970s. Harassment existed, as earlier chapters have illustrated, but it was aimed at bars and other public queer cultural institutions, and it waxed and waned over time. The relative openness of the 1940s and 1950s preceded the crackdowns of the 1960s, and this sapped much of the motivation to mount an organized response. Unlike Washington, D.C., Oklahoma City did not have a political juggernaut on which to focus its rage, or one that might discriminate against homosexuals on a widespread basis and merit said rage. Fear also eroded the climate for resistance in Oklahoma City. With the election of Curtis Harris, gay and bisexual men felt that any activism would cost them their jobs, their community standing, and possibly lead to violence.

This fear remained a common theme in the gay community until 1978 when national and local events conspired to ignite a political fire in the Oklahoma City gay community that has yet to be extinguished. That it occurred a decade or more later than in cities like Philadelphia, New York, or San Francisco was not a testament to homophobia in Oklahoma City, or the power of the Christian Right to suppress dissent. The delay of the politicization in the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual community was a function of practicality. The means did not justify the ends until 1978, when a very public and powerful local attack against homosexuals occurred when the Oklahoma legislature passed the Helm Bill. Queer political activism and apparatus grew in spurts, but it did not retreat, which is a testament to the efforts of several pioneer gay activists in

⁴ Bill Rogers, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 9/18/2004.

Oklahoma City. Oklahoma City gay and bisexual politics evolved as local situations demanded, not as national events dictated. Therefore to say that Oklahoma City was “behind the times” or in a “lag” in relation to other much larger cities misses a crucial point about gay politics in Oklahoma City and nationally; the need to organize and be politically active was not acute until 1978, but when that need arose, local residents met that challenge successfully.⁵

By the mid-1970s, the gay rights movement had gained enough ground to place a number of equal protection measures and laws guaranteeing civil rights on the ballot in several states.⁶ In Miami, Florida, city leaders actually passed an anti-discrimination ordinance which specifically prohibited discrimination based upon a resident’s sexuality. In response, groups that hoped to preserve traditional standards of morality vowed to fight this and other ordinances, and Miami literally became the line in the sand. One of the more outspoken opponents of the Miami ordinance was regional celebrity and former

⁵ Thomas E. Guild, et al., “Oklahoma’s Gay Liberation Movement,” in *“An Oklahoma I Had Never Seen Before”: Alternative Views of Oklahoma History*, ed. Davis Joyce (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 328-339. Guild and associates imply that because gay political activism did not occur in Oklahoma until 1979, some ten years after the Stonewall Rebellion, that “It would be reasonable to postulate that today, in terms of visible political action and success in developing an internally cohesive community, Oklahoma is in a similar approximate ten-year cyclical lag.” This seems rather simplistic, and wrong. Their analysis assumes that Stonewall was the point at which a modern gay political activism first occurred, an argument that recent scholarship refutes. Second, it assumes that such activism progressed along a neat, linear continuum in other communities. Finally, it makes politics the central ingredient of “an internally cohesive community,” as though interest group politics can ever be said to create cohesion or community.

⁶ Peter N. Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened: America in the 1970s* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982, 1990), 292-294. Carroll shows that the 1970s were more than just a sedate interim between the turbulent 1960s and the “me” oriented 1980s. Advances were made in the politicization of gay and lesbian communities in smaller communities like Wichita, St. Paul, and Eugene, Oregon in addition to larger cities like San Francisco and Seattle.

Miss Oklahoma, Anita Bryant. Bryant was Oklahoma's sweetheart -- the state's "most famous woman" according to one state legislator -- and much of the South and Midwest had a crush on her too. She was pretty, talented, wholesome, conservative and evangelical. Supporters believed that she was the perfect spokesperson for the New Right, and she proved to be as adept at pitching her own brand of conservative wholesomeness as when she sponsored Minute Maid orange juice. Vowing to stop the "insidious attack on God and His laws," Bryant and her husband formed the Save Our Children movement. Using her powerful appeal and fundraising prowess, Bryant argued that homosexuality was "perverse and dangerous," and charged that these "human garbage" heaps recruited children into their flock. She received help from conservative politicians like George Will, and religious leaders like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, all of whom equated attempts to pass legislation ensuring equality for homosexuals with the ruin of American society. The Save Our Children campaign successfully placed a recall initiative to overturn the anti-discrimination law on the ballot in Miami, and residents passed it by a two-to-one margin.⁷

Anita Bryant and other like-minded supporters relished their victory, and it shaped the debates and political battles over the proper place of homosexuality in society all across the U.S. Similar battles emerged in Wichita, Kansas; Eugene, Oregon; and St. Paul, Minnesota. Conservatives managed to defeat anti-discrimination measures in all of these locales.⁸ For conservatives, these tangible victories indicated that Americans, in

⁷ Carroll, *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*, 290-291; D'Emilio and Friedman, *Intimate Matters*, 346-348.

⁸ D'Emilio and Friedman, *Intimate Matters*, 346-348.

general, were anti-homosexual and determined to fight any attempts to extend employment or housing safeguards to them.

Prior to the 1970s, much of the discrimination felt by gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City at the hands of authorities revolved around sex. Men charged with sodomy, or a wide range of less specific misdemeanor offenses related to the public display of their sexuality, certainly suffered public humiliation and anguish. Authorities used existing laws, that were admittedly applied more stringently to homosexuals, to harass gay and bisexual men, but no serious attempt to codify discrimination had been attempted.

In 1978, Oklahoma lawmakers jumped on the bandwagon that Anita Bryant and her supporters started when they passed legislation that brought Oklahoma to the forefront of the gay rights struggle. Oklahoma state representative John Monks, a Democrat from Muskogee and Senator Mary Helm, a Republican from Oklahoma City, co-sponsored a bill that allowed school boards to dismiss teachers who engaged in “crimes against nature” or otherwise promoted homosexuality in an indiscreet or public manner.⁹ Representative Monks argued that school boards currently were powerless “to fire those who are afflicted with this degenerate problem---people who are mentally deranged in some way.” Monks noted that his bill applied to “both queers and lesbians,” who would not be allowed to practice, disseminate, or inculcate homosexuality in Oklahoma public schools. The bill set out a list of factors that would be considered when school districts removed a suspected homosexual: the likelihood that the activity would adversely affect students or employees, the proximity in “time or place” of the

⁹ “Homosexual Reins Voted,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/8/1978, 1.

behavior to the teacher's official duties, any extenuating or aggravating circumstances, and whether the behavior in question was repeated or promoted to students as being acceptable. The debate over Monks's legislation, known as House Bill 1629, remained relatively benign. Representative George Vaughn, a Democrat from Big Cabin, addressed the most logical issue regarding identification: "How would you know they are this way? Would you have them sign an oath?" "Not necessarily," Monks retorted, "I'm sure word would get around." On February 7, 1978, the Oklahoma House of Representatives approved HB 1629 by an 88-2 margin.¹⁰

Once it was sent to the senate, the bill's co-author, Mary Helm, pulled out all of the stops to see that it passed. Unlike Monks, whose bigotry was more overt, Helm preferred that homosexuals keep quiet about their sexuality. Mary Helm was the Republican Party's shining star in 1978. She was the first woman to serve in the Oklahoma Senate since 1929 and only the second ever to do so. Intensely conservative, Helm opposed the Equal Rights Amendment and proudly proclaimed membership in the John Birch Society, a group on whose behalf she traveled across the country and spoke.¹¹ Although her version of the bill did not automatically exclude homosexuals from seeking employment as a teacher or school aid, it clearly ensured that a teacher's sexual preference in no way impact students.

As part of a massive public relations salvo in support of HB 1629, Senator Helm invited Anita Bryant to address the Senate. On February 21, 1978, Bryant flew in to

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "Opponent of Equal Rights Amendment Aiming Campaign at 'Grass Roots'," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/15/1982, 45.

Wiley Post Airport from her lush Miami, Florida, mansion to encourage Oklahomans to help stop the widespread trend of legislating immorality. The night before her Senate appearance, Bryant and her grass-roots support group, “Oklahomans for Anita,” held a rally that drew over 3000 guests at the State Fair Arena. The program sandwiched Bible passages and exhortations for money between musical performances and Bryant’s diatribes against immorality. Also, a renegade group of teenaged Ku Klux Klan members tried in vain to carry a Confederate battle flag into the arena. No violence occurred, but the frenzied atmosphere concerned the Gay Student Alliance, the University of Oklahoma gay student association that picketed the event. Nine members asked several of the more than thirty Oklahoma City police officers who attended the event to provide them with escorts back to their cars.¹²

On February 21, 1978, Bryant addressed the state senate, a standing-room-only event heavily stacked with HB 1629 supporters. Oklahomans must return to the moral standards “which our forefathers fought and died for” Bryant shouted, arguing that “we cannot legislate morality” but Oklahomans must have the “guts... (to) stop legislating immorality.” Lauding her own efforts to stamp out homosexuality, Bryant related that her campaign has “decreased the number of homosexuals, at least those who outwardly profess homosexuality,” and that the Helm bill was a “defense against pro-homosexual bills.” Bryant even managed to tell a joke at the gathering: “I have thought about running for President...But I changed my mind when I realized my husband would be the

¹² “Anita’s Plea to the Senate: Don’t Legislate Immorality,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/22/1978, 1-2. Klan participation in political rallies is hardly an unknown facet of Oklahoma’s political history. See Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995 edition).

First Lady.” Although steeped in the evangelical revival politics of a by-gone era, the event proved very effective. On April 6, 1978, the Oklahoma Senate unanimously passed HB 1629, 42-0. In a final twist, Governor David Boren announced he would sign the bill immediately.¹³ Anita Bryant and the anti-homosexual lobby successfully denied rights to homosexuals that other citizens took for granted. The climate of intolerance that simmered since the 1950s in Oklahoma City for homosexuals now reached a rapid boil.

Just as the Miami-Dade defeat enraged homosexual activists across the country, the 1978 Helm case stirred some of the first pangs of political organization and political consciousness in Oklahoma City. Before 1977, queer political activism in Oklahoma was virtually non-existent. A number of campus protests and concurrent court battles occurred at both the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University regarding frustrated attempts to start campus-wide gay and lesbian organizations in the early 1970s. However, no organizations outside of academia sought sustained political action or interest group activity before 1978.¹⁴

The Helm Bill and Anita Bryant’s visit motivated gays and lesbians to strike back. This was certainly true for long-time activist and attorney William “Bill” Rogers.

¹³ Ibid. “Homosexual Firing Bill Approved,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/7/1978, 1. For Bryant’s role in passing the law, see Ralph Slovenko, “The Homosexual and Society: A Historical Perspective,” *University of Dayton Law Review* 10, no. 3 (Spring 1985), 453. David Boren would be saddled with charges that he was gay in his bid for the United States Senate seat in 1978. His opponents, Grover Miskovsky and Anthony Points, made note of the beautiful young men that always surrounded Boren, and publicly challenged the governor about the charges. Boren hotly denied the smear. See chapter six for a more thorough discussion of these events.

¹⁴ For a discussion of campus protest and litigation in Oklahoma, see Guild, et al., “Oklahoma’s Gay Liberation Movement,” 332-334.

Rogers, like many of his social contemporaries in Oklahoma City, lived a quiet life and avoided controversy whenever possible. He did, however, have a loose affiliation with the Oklahoma chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, and a friendship with its local executive director, Shirley Barry. Following a difficult coming out process, which included losing both his family and a share in a lucrative law practice, Rogers sensed that times had changed:

I think that we were energized by Anita Bryant's appearance at the (Oklahoma) legislature and the subsequent passage of what was known as the Helms Bill... Shortly after that, I went to my first gay pride march in New York and became acquainted with a man named Bruce Voeller. A delightful, brilliant man! He was the first president of the Gay Activist Alliance in New York and the first co-director of the National Gay Task Force, which eventually became the Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Bruce and I became very close friends and he encouraged my activism, and the (annual Gay Pride) march in New York was just invigorating and exciting. I came back with a determination to do something here.¹⁵

That determination led Bill Rogers to found the Oklahomans for Human Rights in 1979. This group profoundly influenced the way the Oklahoma queer political movement developed. It was the first quasi-political, organized, focused group that lobbied effectively for equal protection for gays and lesbians in Oklahoma. It also tapped into a heretofore-invisible element within the gay community -- the professional class. Wealthy and professional gay men had never been out to the community at large, seemingly for fear of losing their standing in the community, lucrative jobs, professional certificates, or derailing promising political careers. The Oklahomans for Human Rights fought to protect the rights of gay citizens, but the very fact that "gay" did not appear in the group's name allowed some of the more deeply closeted community members to

¹⁵ Bill Rogers, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 9/18/2004.

participate.¹⁶ It was also an organization that found a fast following, as thirty to forty people participated regularly at events. OHR quickly began publishing a newsletter, *Our Time*, and Bill Rogers helped establish a successful sister chapter in Tulsa in 1979. The membership included many well-respected residents of the Oklahoma City community, and they had a lot to lose. “There was a lot of courage displayed in those days,” relates Bill Rogers.¹⁷

OHR made fighting the Helm Bill its first priority, and they fought it vigorously, and they were not afraid to ask for help from national organizations. Although no educators were relieved of duty as a result of the legislation, several teachers in the Oklahoma City school district feared this was coming and felt that a challenge was in order. Several teachers belonged to the National Gay Task Force (NGTF), easily the most successful gay and lesbian rights advocacy groups since its founding in 1973.¹⁸ Bruce Voeller, Bill Rogers’ political mentor, ran NGTF in 1978, and they sponsored litigation against the Oklahoma State Board of Education.¹⁹ A small group of Oklahoma City residents, all of whom remained anonymous to protect their jobs, attempted to fight the Helms bill in September 1979, when they filed a motion against the State Board of Education. Their argument was simple. By singling out homosexuals, the law encouraged harassment and discrimination against teachers and staff for being gay, for

¹⁶ Guild, “Oklahoma’s Gay Liberation Movement,” 330.

¹⁷ Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004; Dennis Neill, email correspondence, 10/5/2005.

¹⁸ Stephen Engel, *The Unfinished Revolution: Social Movement Theory and the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 39-46.

¹⁹ Guild, “Oklahoma’s Gay Liberation Movement,” 334.

associating with and supporting those who are gay, and those who simply tolerate homosexuality. It clearly violated the first amendment right to speech and assembly argued attorney Mike Gassaway.²⁰ This suit failed to generate an injunction or further action in part because it challenged the Oklahoma State Board of Education instead of a particular school district, where the law would be administered and discrimination would occur directly.

With this in mind, one of the first things that Rogers, the OHR, the National Gay Task Force, and the Oklahoma ACLU did was to help sponsor a new lawsuit against the Helm Bill, and this time they named the Oklahoma City Board of Education as defendant in the case. The plaintiff in the suit was an Oklahoma City University graduate student named Stan Easter. Easter, a gay man, possessed an Oklahoma teaching license and studied opera when OHR filed the challenge. At that time, he did not teach in an Oklahoma school district, nor did he feel particularly good about his chances of securing employment. Easter argued that the problem “is that people don’t realize that homosexuals are human beings. There is no need for me to even apply for a job under the present law.” Bill Rogers served as Easter’s attorney in the matter and he noted that although Easter had never been denied employment because of his sexuality, he and other homosexuals “are threatened with loss of earning a living the rest of their lives.” The Helm law created a “chilling effect” on the employment prospects for gay teachers in Oklahoma. Moreover, it was a blatant violation of the First Amendment guarantee of free speech and expression.²¹

²⁰ “Gay Statute Hit in Teacher Suit,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/1/1979, 15.

²¹ “Gays Challenging State Teacher Law,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/14/1980, 1.

Advocates believed that the *NGTF v. Board of Education of City of Oklahoma City* would have a profound impact upon the future employment status of gays and lesbians throughout the United States. Supporters knew from the beginning that the case would be hotly contested and hoped it would eventually reach the United States Supreme Court, where the issue of hiring standards based upon sexual preference would be decided once and for all. State ACLU Executive Director Shirley Barry called it the most “significant challenge ever filed on this issue,” and as a result the reactions were mixed. The number of letters fired off to the *Daily Oklahoman* regarding the issue was probably significant, with most likely not in support of the lawsuit. However, the *Oklahoman* printed only one letter from an Oklahoma City resident opposed to the suit, and none in support of it. The anonymous “CEM” faulted the ACLU for being “up to their disruptive legal tricks” in supporting the Easter lawsuit. “Oklahomans in general and parents of school-age children in particular are painfully aware that homosexuals are degenerate human beings by their own choice...We don’t want a potential classroom Gacy in a position to molest and murder our children,” he continued.²²

The first action on the lawsuit occurred on June 29, 1982, when U.S. District Judge Luther Eubanks ruled against Easter and upheld a local school board’s right to terminate an employee for engaging in “public” homosexual activity. The ruling surprised no one, according to Bill Rogers, who vowed to appeal. Judge Eubanks called many of Easter’s claims of possible discrimination and retaliation “unwarranted,” and argued that “public homosexual activity would likely affect the efficiency of a teacher.

²² Ibid.; *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/19/1980, 22.

Clearly a teacher's efficiency is related to the performance of his job and hence, his fitness to teach."²³

The ruling undoubtedly pleased opponents of Easter, as their goals seemed consistent with mainstream American feelings regarding homosexuality. A series of Gallup Polls conducted in July of 1977 showed that Americans held some very definite beliefs about homosexuality, homosexuals, and their place in society. Two-thirds of Americans believed that homosexuality was more widespread than ever before, and about fifty-six percent believed that environment and socialization determined one's sexual preference, rather than it being an innate personal characteristic. Seventy percent of Americans felt that homosexuals should not be allowed to adopt children; about fifty percent thought that private sexual behavior of homosexuals should remain illegal, and thirty-three percent believed that homosexuals could not be considered good Christians or Jews as a result of their sexual preference. While over fifty-six percent of respondents believed that gays and lesbians should have the same protections and access to jobs as heterosexuals, over sixty-five percent considered certain occupations inappropriate for homosexuals. Respondents believed that homosexuals were fit to serve as doctors, salespeople, and military personnel -- positions which involved a great deal of contact with the general public -- but not to work in public schools or as clergy.²⁴ Perhaps the thought of homosexuals recruiting young children to their ranks -- a common belief for some -- made people uneasy about LGBT schoolteachers. In any case, Oklahomans

²³ "Judge Backs Ability to Fire Gay Teachers," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/30/1982, 38.

²⁴ "Poll Backs 'Gays' Job Rights," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/17/1977, 194; "Public sees Gay Upswing," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/18/1977, 5; "Poll Says Gays' Future Difficult," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/19/1977, 13.

would likely have been even more conservative in regard to national opinions on these issues.

Any celebrations by the pro-HB 1629 lobby were tempered by the prophetic warning Judge Eubanks included at the end of his ruling, however. Serious constitutional issues would arise if schools refused to retain or hire an educator “who merely advocates equality in or tolerance of homosexuality; a teacher who assigns for class study articles and books written by advocates of gay rights; a teacher who expresses an opinion, publicly” about the issue. In essence, Judge Eubanks provided the rationale by which another court case might challenge the Helms law by pointing out what activists and laymen alike already knew. From a common-sense standpoint, how could a school district clearly and rationally define the “advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging or promoting public or private homosexual activity in a manner that creates a substantial risk” to school employees?²⁵ Further, what qualified as “promotion” of homosexuality? Would making statements condemning homophobic language and attitudes used by students be considered promotional in nature? How would homosexuals and their private life be made public in the school setting? Would the testimony of colleagues be sufficient enough to start an investigation? The nature of the arguments used against allowing gays and lesbians to teach -- that they must recruit “members” since they cannot procreate, that their sexual orientation is a contagious and degenerate lifestyle choice that might be easily disseminated to impressionable Oklahoma children, and that their sexual preference renders them incapable of a non-sexual thought -- suggested that the personal

²⁵ Official designation of HB 1629 was Oklahoma Statutes, Title 70, Sec. 6-103-15(A)-(2).

behavior of the individual, even if beyond reproach in every way, was irrelevant. If they were openly gay, they were targeted for removal. For years, teachers convicted of moral turpitude lost their teaching certificates anyway, which effectively barred educators caught making inappropriate advances to students or other sex-related offenses from teaching in Oklahoma before the Helm bill passed. When Representative Monks said on the floor of the Oklahoma legislature that names of gay teachers would “get around” the schools and make the offender known to the administration, the impracticality of administering the law, to say nothing of its rather chilling reminder of the purges of homosexuals from the federal workforce in the 1950s, was obvious.²⁶

From a legal standpoint, a number of First Amendment violations existed in the Helm Bill. The 10th Circuit Court of Appeals heard the case on these grounds in 1984. Bill Rogers helped argue the case, and he felt the appeal would successfully overturn Judge Eubanks’s decision. By a 2-1 vote, the court ruled that a school district could still fire homosexuals for public, overt expressions of sexuality, just as they might a heterosexual teacher. The court found unconstitutional the provisions of the law that encouraged “punishment of teachers for public homosexual conduct,” noting that “its deterrent effect on legitimate expression is both real and substantial.” Further, the court clarified the difference between an implied and imminent threat: “encouraging and promoting, like advocating, do not necessarily imply incitement to imminent action...A state’s interest outweighs a teacher’s interest only when the expression results in a material or substantial interference or disruption in the normal activities of the school.” In short, gay and lesbian Oklahomans deserved the same free speech protections that any

²⁶ Monks quote taken from “Homosexual Reins Voted,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/8/1978, 1.

other citizen held.²⁷ The Oklahoma law would allow a teacher to be removed or refused employment whether or not any measurable “disruption” occurred.

The *Daily Oklahoman* responded with a series of stinging editorials that attacked the plaintiffs for twisting the intent of the law. In calling the decision a “boost for permissiveness,” the paper chided judges for contributing to the deterioration of American morality by upholding gay schoolteachers’ rights of free speech:

The court’s majority seemed to say that it is all right for a teacher to tell the pupils that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle, as long as the teacher doesn’t touch one of the children. One wonders if the judges would allow the same freedom of expression for a teacher extolling the virtues of adultery. Both are considered by most people to be immoral conduct.²⁸

Later, when the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear the case on appeal, the editors found it shameful that “the state’s effort to protect its school children from possible indoctrination into a lifestyle most of its citizens find immoral and abhorrent must be defended before the highest court in the land.” The NGTF twisted the original intent of the law, which the newspaper defined as “preventing homosexual teachers from using their position of authority and influence to shape the ideas of impressionable children,” into some kind of free speech crusade in their eyes. In a rather odd editorial shortly before the U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments, the paper called the action “A Test for

²⁷ “State Can’t Fire Teachers for Being Gay,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/15/1984, 9; “Court Takes Gay Case,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/2/1984, 35.

²⁸ *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/16/1984, 12.

Sooner Attitude,” as though sheer will and determination to champion Oklahoma morality might somehow determine the outcome.²⁹

The U.S. Supreme Court heard the case on January 14, 1985. Oklahoma City University law professor Dennis Arrow argued for the Oklahoma City school board, and Laurence Tribe, Harvard University law professor, represented the NGTF. Arrow took the position that the law could be applied fairly as written, without violating the First Amendment rights of homosexuals in Oklahoma, by policing only the overt promotions of homosexuality. Tribe responded by calling the bill a “heavy-handed attempt to limit debate on an important public issue by forbidding all public school teachers from speaking out on homosexuality.” Tribe painted Oklahoma as anti-homosexual, and noted that although twenty-nine states had repealed anti-sodomy laws to date, Oklahoma’s sodomy law was still in effect. The language of the Helms bill also only prohibited homosexuals from “advocating” or “promoting” sodomy, he argued, which again seemed to violate the First Amendment by unfairly targeting gay teachers for removal when they “promoted” homosexuality in the classroom. The final word on the Helms bill came down on March 26, 1985. By a 4-4 vote, the Court affirmed the 10th Circuit’s judgment that parts of HB 1629 violated the First Amendment.³⁰

The circumstances surrounding the decision were somewhat unusual. Justice Lewis Powell, despite listening to arguments on January 14th, was supposedly ill and unable to cast a vote. Legal scholars considered Powell a fairly conservative judge, one

²⁹ “Intent of Law Twisted,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/3/1984, 6; “A Test for Sooner Attitude,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/2/1985, 10.

³⁰ *National Gay Task Force v. Board of Education, City of Oklahoma City*, 470 U.S. 903 (1985).

who consistently voted to allow local schools to make decisions for their own benefit. In addition, the Court did not issue a written opinion, a fact that made later attempts to refine the bill in the Oklahoma legislature more difficult and denied gay rights activists a powerful and symbolic victory for the entire country. With a tie vote, the decision automatically affirmed the 10th Circuit's ruling, but the case could not be used as a precedent, and the decision only affected states in the 10th Circuit.³¹

After the victory, the editorial staff at the *Daily Oklahoman* encouraged teachers in Oklahoma to fight back. "The American Civil Liberties Union...surely won't object if teachers who believe that homosexuality is wrong speak their peace about it, in the classroom or outside, just to provide some balance." Apparently, the editorial staff reasoned that since homosexuals now had the right of free speech and expression, they were probably going to exercise it incessantly. The editorial wryly noted how "unfortunate" Justice Lewis Powell's absence was from such an important vote, especially when the court had already rescheduled three other cases due to his illness.³²

Why the court refused to reschedule this case is unclear. Perhaps the justices wanted to strike down an unfair piece of legislation without setting a historic precedent or opening itself to revisit still more cases of abuse. The Court's refusal to issue a written opinion suggests this was possible, as it prevented lawmakers from redesigning the law via their arguments to make it pass muster. Dennis Arrow believed that Powell would

³¹ Slovenko, "The Homosexual and Society," 453; "Defeat of Law Allowing Gay Teacher Firings Called Victory," *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/27/1985, 15; "Court Axes Anti-Gay Statute," *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/27/1985, 97-98. The six states in the 10th District at the time the decision was rendered were Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, and Oklahoma.

³² "Free Speech for Everyone," *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/28/1985, 18.

have upheld the Oklahoma statute, given his staunch belief in the sanctity of home rule and local discretion on school matters. Perhaps, but others believed that Powell would have found the First Amendment violations, to say nothing of the due process restrictions contained in the Helm Bill, impossible to sustain.

Many Oklahomans greeted the Supreme Court's decision with apprehension, as a sign that gays and lesbians were pushing a radical agenda. Lawmakers tried to contain this murky threat by proposing legislation that once again denied gays and lesbians basic fundamental rights, and although all would eventually fail, they spoke to the heightened level of homophobia in Oklahoma by 1985. With the help of State Attorney General Mike Turpin, State Representatives Gary Sherrer, Frank Harbin, and Michael Hunter proposed HB 1569 in April of 1985. The bill refined the language of the Helm Bill to prohibit the "promotion of homosexuality during school or school-related activities...in such a manner that such activity is indiscreet and not practiced in private." Like the Helm Bill, HB 1569 sought to eliminate homosexuals from the classroom, and it clearly failed the constitutional test outlined in *NGTF v Board of Education* less than a month earlier. As Rep. Sherrer argued, "we just feel like the people of Oklahoma concur in the feeling that homosexuals should not be allowed to teach in the classroom."³³ That comment, once again, illustrated that if the bill passed, school districts could fire gay and lesbian teachers simply for being gay, even if they practiced their "homosexuality" in a discreet or private fashion.

In an even more egregious attempt to circumvent the rights of homosexuals, Senator Jerry Pierce, a Republican from Bartlesville, attached an amendment to a fair

³³ "House Bill Replaces Gay Teacher Statute," *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/17/1985, 1.

housing bill then under consideration. The Oklahoma legislature hoped to develop fair housing standards that targeted discriminatory practices in renting and selling property based on race, religion, sex, age, handicap, or nationality. Only ten states lacked such a standard by 1985, one of them being Oklahoma. Senator Pierce's amendment excluded homosexuality from the acceptable list of offenses by which the Oklahoma Human Rights Commission could investigate housing discrimination. A landlord himself, Pierce believed that "I should be able to consider if I want to sell to someone who has that kind of lifestyle." Senator Bernard McIntyre, a Democrat from Tulsa, had fought the Helm Bill, and he opposed Pierce's amendment for the same reason. "It's a clear-cut indication that they want to discriminate against gays...What people do in their personal lives is none of my business." McIntyre planned to get a severalty clause attached to the bill, which would have allowed the new standards for housing discrimination to go into effect even if a court invalidated part of the bill dealing with homosexuals. All of these bills died in committee, according to lobbyist Keith Smith, who campaigned tirelessly to see that the legislature respected the rights of gay and lesbian residents in Oklahoma.³⁴

Despite the attempts to undermine it, *NGTF v. Board of Education* was an important victory for gays and lesbians all across the United States. For the first time in almost twenty years, the Supreme Court heard a case involving discrimination against homosexuals and ruled in their favor. In Oklahoma City, the victory intensified the political activity of gays and lesbians and brought more and more people out to support their causes. OHR remained vigilant in seeking to meet discrimination against

³⁴ Ibid.

homosexuals with legal challenges, and they continued campaigns to remove legislators who sponsored such legislation.

Mary Helm was an early target of the fledgling organization, as before ink on the Helm Bill was even dry, OHR set out to find a viable candidate to oppose her 1978 reelection bid. They found him in Bernest Cain, a lobbyist with Common Cause, an Oklahoma City-based lobby group. Cain, a Democrat, was seen as a “good, liberal person” who would fight for what was right, regardless of the political fallout. Cain struggled early just to make it on to the November ballot, as independent candidate Nelson Berry and Democrat Jeff Laird filed a challenge with the State Election Board arguing Cain had not lived in District 46 for six months prior to filing for the seat.³⁵ The gay community came out in full force to support Cain. “She (Helm) was the enemy, word was out. We called on virtually every voter in that district,” remembered one gay rights activist. In a close election, 5182 votes to 5005 votes, marred by a malfunctioning voting machine, Cain defeated Helm and represented District 46 for the next twenty-four years.³⁶ The results proved very gratifying for OHR and the gay community, as this represented their first truly grassroots political effort that yielded

³⁵ Description of Cain from Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004; “Cain Candidacy Upheld,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/5/1978, 22.

³⁶ Quote taken from “Gays Flexing Political Muscles, But remain Divided on Strategy,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/4/1983, 9; The election was so close---only 177 votes separated the candidates---that when news that a voting machine containing almost 200 votes had malfunctioned, Helm filed a protest with the Oklahoma Election Board that was eventually settled by the Oklahoma Supreme Court on January 3, 1979. Apparently, the party designations for each candidate were reversed in the machine, possibly causing straight-party votes for each candidate to be reversed. See “Helm Protests Election Tally,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/10/1978, 1; “High Court to Consider Helm Case,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/29/1978, 13; “Cain the Victor, Court Declares,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/4/1979, 1.

tangible results. “(Cain) is a wonderful person, a good liberal person who has never forgotten he was elected largely through the efforts of the gay and lesbian community, and he has always been willing to do anything he could do for us in the legislature.”³⁷

The Cain victory made the gay community in Oklahoma City an important and courted interest group for the first time.

OHR’s successes were impressive but not absolute, especially in regard to establishing what direction the organization would take, and the means by which that direction would be traveled. There were conflicts between Bill Rogers and other “power-egos” involved with OHR from the beginning. Rogers was by most accounts a militant personality -- a “scorched Earth everybody should be out of the closet” kind of person, according to Paul Thompson. A highly motivated attorney, Rogers ran in the same circles with high-profile gay rights advocates in larger cities like New York and San Francisco. Another, significant portion of OHR preferred to keep a lower profile. Many of them were schoolteachers or other licensed professionals who could not afford to lose their certifications, and they preferred a more accommodating approach.³⁸ This group believed that a lot of people in Oklahoma City would react negatively to politically active homosexuals, and given the historical record, they probably were correct. Rogers did not care. He sensed that now was the perfect time for the Oklahoma City gay community to become a political force. The stark and irreconcilable differences between significant groups within OHR led many to leave the group, but those who stayed set the

³⁷ Paul Thompson, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 12/22/2004.

³⁸ Ibid.

direction of the organization and played a large role in defining gay political activism in Oklahoma City for years to come.

Paul Thompson was one resident who became involved in OHR after the split. A political activist and life-long Oklahoma City resident, Thompson knew the ups and downs of being a gay man in Oklahoma well. He was married, divorced, suffered the problems of coming out to his wife and children, and felt frustrated at the low priority that gay men and women gave political activism in Oklahoma City. After deciding to rejoin OHR, Thompson actively pursued issues aimed to make the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual community more “communal.”

A friend of mine got involved at the same time. We went to the National Gay Leadership Conference in Dallas, the first national gay and lesbian conference in the United States, (which discussed) how gay and lesbian people could empower themselves in their communities. We found that what gay and lesbian communities that had a real sense of “community” had in common were a community newspaper and community center. So we came back and decided to do some of that stuff.³⁹

From that point came a push to establish some permanent trappings of community for gay and lesbian Oklahoma City residents, and one of the seminal elements established at that time was the Oasis Gay Community Center. The center was an important, permanent part of the subculture, and one of the first that was not tied to entertainment pursuits per se. The gay and lesbian community in Oklahoma City, as was true of all non-coastal communities in the United States at that juncture, had no physical, dedicated space in which to hold conferences, distribute information, or provide an anchor for emotional and material support before 1983. In that year, OHR made the establishment of a community center a high priority, and Paul Thompson’s vision became a reality.

³⁹ Ibid.

Bill Rogers and Scott Foster met with Scott Wilson and Don Hill, owners of the pioneering Oklahoma City gay disco, Angles, and encouraged the men to donate a building next door to their club to house the new community center. Some within OHR were leery of Scott Wilson and Don Hill's involvement in the center, as both had a reputation for being "business-first, community-second" people, especially since they only leased the building to the Center. In truth, their motives were at least partially driven by financial gain. "Part of why they wanted to do it was at the time there was a big debate over whether 39th Street was going to be the gay center or Classen Boulevard, with the Free Spirit. (Wilson and Hill) wanted it (Oasis) as an anchor to draw the community there so they would make money," remembers Thompson. In any case, Hill and Wilson allowed the Oasis Center to locate in their building, and it opened in July of 1984.⁴⁰

The gay community's tepid reaction to the Oasis Center disappointed members of OHR like Thompson and Rogers, both of whom fought the Helm Bill and generally devoted much of their free time and professional contacts to advancing the cause for gay and lesbian equality in Oklahoma City. Thompson said, "The community had NO interest whatever... there was a group of about eight of us, but the community had no interest. We had no history of people working together for any kind of mutual goals or anything."⁴¹ The original eight, however, were instrumental in seeing the Center to fruition. They planned a wide range of activities for the community, such as a gay film

⁴⁰ Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005 and 6/19/2005; Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004; Guild, et al., "Oklahoma's Gay Liberation Movement," 330; "Angles Celebrates 20 Years," *Gayly Oklahoman* (15 September 2002).

⁴¹ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

festival, scheduled regular meetings for Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, disseminated information about AIDS, sponsored an early PFLAG meeting, and developed a food bank and clothes closet program for needy people in the community, gay or straight. That original dedicated group also helped fund the Center's activities by organizing garage sales, soliciting donations, and by using their own money, and they staffed the Center by volunteering on the weekends.⁴²

Part of the reluctance to embrace the Oasis Center stemmed from the fact that other quasi-political and interest groups feared not being able to control the direction of the Center. This inaction hurt the Center's overall effectiveness and worked against one of its core goals – to cultivate rank-and-file participation and political activism by gay and bisexual community members. With this in mind, Thompson and others held a “last-chance” meeting for groups to sign on to the Center's board and help shape policy. A large number of people showed up, took their place on the board, and within a few months voted to sever ties completely with OHR. According to Thompson, they then “rewrote history about what a wonderful job they did putting this Center together.”⁴³

Thompson's bitterness is understandable, given his extensive efforts to keep the Center going, but the conflicts that plagued OHR over the ways and means to move the Oklahoma City gay subculture made it controversial from its inception. Also, Bill Rogers rubbed some people the wrong way. Long-time Oklahoma City political lobbyist and gay activist Keith Smith described Rogers this way:

⁴² Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004; Lynnette Hill, “Oasis, the Gay/Lesbian Community Center Celebrates 5 Years of Service in OKC,” *Gayly Oklahoman* (October 1988); Peggy Johnson, “Hopes Run High For Center,” *Gayly Oklahoman* (July 1984).

⁴³ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

Bill is very different from gay activists I meet today: very opinionated, very lacking in diplomacy skills from time to time. But he got it started. I've been in the trenches with him, and I've been fighting it out with him. It is really hard for some people in our movement to disagree vehemently with someone without deciding they are your enemy for life. Thank God Bill and I have never done that, because we have disagreed HEAVILY before. If I could change anything about Bill...because I think that he is so smart and he was always such a good image for our community, especially in the early days, because he was a very handsome 40-50 year old attorney that you would never think was gay. Bill is rigid and opinionated---sometimes that is what it takes. If Bill had just come out this week and tried to get active in organizations, he would be less liked and respected than he was back then for several reasons. There was less need for diplomacy back then---it was war!⁴⁴

Given the controversy, some simply stayed away from OHR, and the Center's affiliation with OHR kept some residents from volunteering, or donating money. The Tulsa sister chapter decided to incorporate on its own in 1985, in part due to concerns about Oklahoma City OHR's continued viability.⁴⁵ In any case, after 1984, the Oasis Community Center was no longer linked to OHR in any meaningful way, and both sides likely were relieved.

Although starting the Oasis Center would be a crown jewel in any gay and lesbian political organization's history, the development of the *Gayly Oklahoman* probably had a greater immediate impact on the community at large. When first organized, OHR published a monthly newsletter called *Our Time*, which kept people abreast of political events and community information. Paul Thompson was on the steering committee that created the newsletter until two other members of OHR took over. The driving organizer was Ron Shaffer, an ordained Southern Baptist minister defrocked by the Southern Baptist Convention once revelations about his sexuality

⁴⁴ Keith Smith, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 7/20/2005.

⁴⁵ Dennis Neill, email correspondence, 10/5/2005.

emerged. The other was Don Hawkins, a local businessman and Shaffer's lover.

Shaffer and Hawkins took over *Our Time* and quickly made it an important source of social, political, and entertainment news for the entire community.⁴⁶

Eventually, the publication of *Our Time* became problematic largely as a result of its expanding size and success. Shaffer told the OHR board that one of two things needed to occur. To keep publishing *Our Time* under its present format required more money, or else the magazine must shrink and be more specialized, thus alienating much of its core audience. Or it must spin off into its own identity and continue to evolve into what it was already becoming: a community newspaper. The OHR board, apparently eager to be relieved of the cost of publishing *Our Time*, chose the latter.⁴⁷

Hawkins and Shaffer introduced the *Gayly Oklahoman*, so named as a direct slap at the Gaylord family newspaper – the *Daily Oklahoman* -- in October of 1983. Growing pains were evident from the beginning, as the two struggled to raise printing and binding fees, and more often than not the money came out of their own pockets. Journal Record Publishing printed the *Gayly* for the first year or so “until management got homophobic and canceled our (contract).” Some of the employees at JRP helped Hawkins and Shaffer find another printer, however, one they used until the *Gayly* suspended publication in January 2006.⁴⁸ The community at-large helped out considerably, and the usual suspects turned out in force, such as long-time Oklahoma City gay rights activists and businessmen like Harry Livesay, Mark Clark, and Keith

⁴⁶ Ibid; Paula Sophia, “The Gayly Goodbye.” *The Gayly Oklahoman*, 24, no. 2 (1/15/2006).

⁴⁷ Ibid; Guild, et al., “Oklahoma’s Gay Liberation Movement,” 330.

⁴⁸ Don Hawkins, email interview, 8/3/2005.

Smith. Smith remembers that “a bunch of us were volunteering for... the *Gayly Oklahoman*. For the first year or so, they did not have any paid staff, so those of us in the community that felt it was very important to have a way to disseminate information out to the community (volunteered). You never could find anything, good or bad, on the news. It was like we were invisible and marginalized.” Initially, the paper went out to about 4000 residents monthly.⁴⁹ During the early days of the AIDS crisis, the *Gayly* was one of the only sources for information about the disease’s spread and treatment options. It was also very important in helping LGBT residents come to terms with their sexuality. In a regular feature entitled “Out and About,” local residents and business owners were asked to be photographed and share some aspect of their lives with readers. This was in keeping with Hawkins and Shaffer’s desire to remind readers that they were “more than who they love.” As Hawkins related: “The biggest difference between now and then is the willingness of people to be photographed. Nobody except drag queens would allow us to take pictures of them. It’s a lot different today. I guess that’s the most significant measure of progress.”⁵⁰

By 1984, OHR’s affiliation with the Oasis Center was officially over, *Our Time* had morphed into the *Gayly Oklahoman* and developed into a self-sufficient newspaper, and OHR the organization died not long after. A number of factors led to the group’s implosion, but they all led back to one essential element---OHR successfully met most of its stated goals. The organization defeated the Helm Bill and opposed homophobic

⁴⁹ Keith Smith, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 7/20/2005; Don Hawkins, interview by author, 8/3/2005. The *Gayly Oklahoman* is now published bi-weekly and has a circulation of over 10,000 per issue.

⁵⁰ Sophia, “The Gayly Goodbye,” 3.

candidates like Mary Helm, it helped start a community center that is still in operation today, it essentially started the *Gayly Oklahoman*, and it raised the political consciousness and expectations for the entire LGBT community in Oklahoma City. “In a way it was like people whose whole identity comes from being parents---when the kids grow up they don’t know who they are anymore. We had a list of goals, OHR did, and we realized them all. We didn’t know what to do next, and it really faltered and caved in.”⁵¹

Into that political void stepped the Oklahoma Gay and Lesbian Political Caucus (OGLPC), created in 1985 by Keith Smith.⁵² OGLPC was much broader in its activism than the OHR, although it benefited from the earlier efforts by OHR to empower the Oklahoma City gay male world. Smith was a political animal by this time, having participated in gay and lesbian politics in Wichita opposing Anita Bryant and her Save Our Children campaign, as well as the controversy surrounding the Helm Bill here in Oklahoma. While still a student at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Smith joined OHR and made frequent trips to Oklahoma City to attend meetings, go to gay clubs, and be a part of the Oklahoma City gay community. OHR never quite lived up to his expectations, however:

It focused on support for the community, with activities and functions---we had a free university where people came in and taught classes. It really wasn’t completely political, and most everyone was very closeted. It was a way to be around other professional gay people in more of a social setting than anything. Slowly we evolved and became more political, but it was more of a community organization.

⁵¹ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

⁵² Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005. Originally, the organization was called the Oklahoma Gay Political Caucus. In 1989, the organization voted to become the OGLPC, no doubt in recognition of its female membership.

Accordingly, Smith started OGLPC with a desire to directly influence policy and work to elect candidates for office who supported gay and bisexual causes. He and other activists like Harry Livesay developed intricate networks with legislators and important civic and business leaders all over Oklahoma City. One of Smith's favorite and most successful means to preserve the rights of gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents was to channel harmful legislation into Bernest Cain's committee, which effectively killed it. Sometimes he convinced legislators to kill such bills outright. The fight was lonely at times, as the group had a difficult time convincing people to join and be politically active:

I quickly understood ---quicker than most in the gay community---that we weren't going to get anywhere unless we did it with politics. If we were ever going to get straight people to think we were OK, we had to get political---influence political figures and get people elected that were going to create a better society for us. So I created the OGLPC... There were so few of us really. It's hard to get people involved today, but it was REALLY hard back then. The vast majority of us lived two separate lives. So, it was like beating your head against a wall to get people involved...I don't know how people saw us, whether they saw us as too nerdy or what. We were doing politics, and they had no interest. It was threatening and scary because it could force you out of the closet and you might suffer job discrimination or violence. We always had a hard time getting it off the ground and getting people involved.⁵³

By 1990, Oklahoma City's gay and bisexual male world was politically active, provided its members found the right motivation, and much of the credit for that transformation must go to organizations like OHR and men like Bill Rogers, Paul Thompson, and Keith Smith. Fighting the Helm Bill marshaled community fear and outrage. OHR then channeled those feelings into a grassroots politicization that set the stage for later political victories for gay and bisexual men. This transformation occurred later in Oklahoma City than in cities like San Francisco or New York City, but it

⁵³ Ibid.

happened nonetheless. Local attacks on homosexuals escalated in the late 1970s, and it was at that juncture, when the ends finally justified the means, that this politicization occurred. The machinery of gay and bisexual politics grew in a haphazard way to be sure, but it did not retreat. The timing of Oklahoma City's politicization followed the demands of local events, rather than adhering to the scripts written by coastal Meccas like San Francisco. That does not diminish its significance, or its relevance, to the greater narrative of gay and bisexual political awareness in the United States.

Chapter VIII

From All Angles: The Maturation of the Oklahoma City Gay Male World

As the previous chapter indicated, the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male world changed dramatically in the late 1970s. Many of its high-profile members participated in local politics and helped establish the gay community as an interest group willing and motivated to redress inequality. Although this development was a key aspect of the subculture's maturity, it was no more important than the changes in the patterns of socialization and sexual relations that occurred throughout the 1970s. With the disappearance of many of the safer spots downtown for anonymous sex, the 1970s witnessed a movement of sex to other locations. Four of the most popular places included parks, rest stops along the interstate highways, bookstores, and a rather notorious bathhouse. The movement here was both geographic and psychic. By physically moving public sex to places right on the city limits or just beyond, queer residents hoped to avoid persecution, to carve out a sexualized space free from the constraints of curfew and beer laws. This movement also engendered a spiritual shift in the way Oklahoma City gay men enjoyed sex with one another in public. As a direct consequence of the crackdown by city authorities, public gay sex became more varied, more available in the long run, and more brazen. Men openly had sex in public -- even on picnic tables -- and they opened new tearooms in the most unlikely and dangerous of places. Also occurring at this juncture was the physical movement of the entertainment

and socialization center of the gay and lesbian community to Northwest 39th Street.

Here, Oklahoma City gay residents experienced their own Stonewall, when in response to police brutality and harassment a local disco fought back and helped make this area the permanent socialization center for the gay and lesbian community. Drawing on the tradition of resistance established by gay residents in the 1940s and 1950s, post-Angles queer residents were more determined than ever to fight back, compete for public space with heterosexuals, and remain visible.

Historians have documented the lure of sex in public parks for gay men, and in some cases it dates from the early 20th century. George Chauncey showed that a variety of public parks, especially Central Park and Bryant Park, served as socialization centers, convenient locations for furtive sex hookups, and a point of entry into the queer New York milieu for hundreds of young gay men after World War I. Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square, Cobbs Creek Park, and League Island Park were central hubs in that city's gay and lesbian social landscape before World War II. Likewise, Washington, D.C.'s notorious Lafayette Park, located across the street from the White House, Franklin Park, Farragut Square, and the Smithsonian Park were the most popular spots for same-sex and interracial sexual interaction in the nation's capital. Even Portland's Lownsdale Park, a well-known queer space by the 1910s, served as a key source of gay sex, bought and sold.¹

¹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 180-183; Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Love*, 87-94; Brett Beemyn, "A Queer Capital: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Life in Washington, D.C., 1890-1955" (Ph. D dissertation, University of Iowa, 1997), 20-28; Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 113-115.

In Oklahoma City, same-sex activity occurred less frequently in public parks until after World War II, and authorities never seriously policed it until the 1960s.² A number of possible explanations exist, but the most obvious is that the availability of cheap rooms downtown made same-sex activity in parks less attractive. The rooms were safer and just as convenient. The availability of nightspots and bars, which operated in relative openness in Oklahoma City, provided gay and bisexual men with numerous sources of socialization and camaraderie, which further eroded the popularity of parks as a meeting point. Another factor that kept public parks from becoming key sex and socialization centers earlier was the high number of parks in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. While it is likely that gay and bisexual men cruised parks in Oklahoma City for many years, the sheer number of available parks prevented one park from becoming “the place” and thus men walking into the woods for sex or sitting in a park parking lot looking for a partner drew little attention from residents and authorities.

With the decline of both the downtown entertainment district on Grand Avenue and in the number of gay bars, public parks assumed a more prominent place in the Oklahoma City sexual landscape for gay and bisexual men. One of the more infamous spots for those desiring quick, anonymous sex was Hobie Point at Lake Hefner, located in the far northern part of Oklahoma City. Technically inside Oklahoma City limits, Lake Hefner drew many urban visitors, yet it remained secluded enough that authorities ignored it unless they received complaints. In the mid-1960s, Hobie Point was a nice lakefront picnic area, set off by a long drive lined with trees that cruisers used as a blind

² Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Jim Fortenberry, interview by author, 7/3/2005; Earnest, interview by author, 3/6/2005.

to hide from passers-by. In addition, a large brick restroom sat in the middle of the beach, one that became notorious for casual homosexual encounters.

When I first got here, Terry F. and I used to go out to the Point out at Lake Hefner. The OG&E and ONG and Southwestern Bell guys would come out there for lunch, play volleyball, take their shirts off, and get their dicks sucked...Terry and I took picnic lunches and a quilt out there... We spent many a fun afternoon out there entertaining the troops!³

Gay men virtually took over at the Point, mainly due to its seclusion and the fact it was never particularly popular in the afternoon with mothers and children. A sharp eye trained on the long drive and open spaces kept potential problems from police raids to a minimum. As Ralph remembers, "If things looked awkward, you could just lean across the horn to get something out of the car. They (vice) always drove those ratty little Fords anyway."⁴ Consequently, gay men became emboldened and pushed the envelope of acceptable sexual behavior to the breaking point. "Toward the last of the Lake Hefner era, they started going down there and parking (for sex). It's one thing if two guys go into the bushes or into the tearoom, but when you start having groups of cars parking and (people) getting out with quilts and stuff, this brings heat."⁵

Other city parks found more and more gay men cruising for sex as well. Will Rogers' Park, located at Northwest 36th and Portland, Memorial Park, located at Northwest 35th and Classen, and Trosper Park, located at Southeast 29th and Eastern were terribly popular. Located near the old downtown strip, Will Rogers Park and Memorial

³ Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, Oklahoma City, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005.

⁴ Quote from Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005; Joe, interview by author, 3/14/2005; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

⁵ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005.

Park were mainstays for many gay men simply because of their centralized location, as the drive to Lake Hefner might be too far for those on their lunch hour. The police responded to these areas, but usually only close to election time. “It was on the news--- Will Rogers and others. They were in the newspapers too. It was almost an annual event: ‘Clamp down on the restrooms’ campaign.”⁶

The substantial degree of freedom continued into the 1970s, and gay and bisexual residents took advantage of this lull in police harassment, but authorities eventually heeded calls for a major cleanup by the vice detail. Nearby residents and park patrons noticed the increased presence of gay men, and that they used parks for anonymous – and sometimes very public -- sexual encounters. A group of senior citizens complained to police that gay men were taking most of the available parking close to a brand new community center built for them at Will Rogers Park and then headed into the wooded trails for sex.⁷ The police worked undercover and arrested those making indecent proposals, and their presence made a difference, but they never drove gay and bisexual men from the park completely. In 1978, the Oklahoma City vice squad unit, sex crimes division, stepped up surveillance of areas reputed to be popular hangouts for gay men. Unit commander Kenneth “Sugar” Smith reported that in January of 1978, the number of officers patrolling parks, municipal buildings, and other areas would increase. In April of 1978 following surveillance of the second floor restroom at the Oklahoma City-County Library, undercover officers arrested two men for soliciting sex from them. Later that

⁶ Joe, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 3/14/2005; Terressa Terrell, email interview, 4/16/2005.

⁷ “Park Gays Rile Elderly,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/18/1978; “City Police Arrest Four On Charge of Lewdness,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/29/1978, 23; “Two City Men Accused of Homosexual Activity,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/5/1978, 9.

week, the police arrested four more men at the City Hall restroom, also for lewd behavior. Arrests continued, off and on, until 1980.⁸

Gay and bisexual men who enjoyed the expanding popularity of parks as sexual and socialization centers worried about more than just the stepped-up police patrols. Some gay men stayed away, not out of fear of being arrested, but for fear of being assaulted by teenagers or other gay men. By the early 1970s, gay men made Will Rogers Park a popular socialization center, where people went not only to have sex but also to play frisbee, exercise, or just talk. The beautiful scenery and sedate surroundings belied the danger that could creep up at any moment. Teenage boys drove through the park at high speeds hurling rocks and epithets at whomever they could find. The bathrooms and surrounding woods provided notorious hiding places for male prostitutes and “trolls”--- gay men, usually over fifty years of age, known for aggressively pursuing younger men for sex. Younger gay men complained that they could not simply come to the park and enjoy the weather or socialize for fear of being assaulted or associated with the less desirable elements.⁹

When park sex was either unavailable or inconvenient, gay and bisexual men could always look to popular highway rest stops or truck stops for satisfaction. The rest-stop located along Interstate 35 about eight miles south of Guthrie, was easily one of the most popular. Situated outside of city limits and in Logan County, the secluded rest stop was still close enough to Oklahoma City so that patrons looking for sex could make

⁸ “Police Nab Three on Sex Counts,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/12/1978, 17; “More Held On Morals Complaints,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/13/1978, 20; “4 Arrested In Lewdness Complaints,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/24/1980, 22.

⁹ “‘Trolls’ Replace Straights as Primary Threat to Homosexuals,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/27/1984, 12.

frequent visits. The Logan County Sheriff's office consisted of exactly seven officers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which meant they could not police the area with any regularity. As a result, the Guthrie rest stop emerged as a favorite cruising spot for men like Ralph:

Well for notorious, Jackie and I went out to the Roadhouse on Halloween 1974. We were drunk when we got there, and more so when we left, and we decided to go to Guthrie rest stop. It was 3 or 4:00 in the morning, huge moon out there, and cold. I get there, and...so I went out and started knocking on the (truckers') windows. Three of them said no, in a polite way, and three of them said yes, so I had some brief encounters. So with the last one, he not only said no, but he came out of there with a tire iron. I am tired, I'm drunk, and...Jackie was on the other side (of the Interstate 35) waiting to see me. When he sees the guy with the tire tool he races down the median, crosses the road, and he starts yelling "run faster, he's gaining on you!" I barely escaped... The Hi-Po's (Highway Patrol Officer) never had any problem with it. Their theory was they would rather have one cocksucking heaven and have the rest of the highway be cool, and that was a terribly intelligent way to look at it. The only complaints anyway were from transients and tourists, and they shouldn't have been wandering around out there at 2:00 AM.¹⁰

Although the Oklahoma Highway Patrol might have preferred to have a single "cocksucking heaven," the Logan County District Attorney did not share that view. William W. Wheeler, then only twenty-seven-years-old and on the job a mere four months, ordered a raid on the Guthrie rest area in the spring of 1973 after receiving complaints of men openly indulging in sex or offering to engage in lewd behavior. Undercover deputies arrested eleven people, including a staff member from the University of Oklahoma. The district attorney allowed six of the eleven to plead down to outraging public decency instead of oral sodomy, and they paid a \$250 fine. The *Daily Oklahoman* magnified their shame by running a story that provided readers with their names, ages, and addresses. Wheeler hoped to make the rest areas safe for travelers

¹⁰ Ralph Prevet, interviews by author, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005.

and prevent the Logan County stops “from becoming a gay hangout.”¹¹ Another raid occurred in 1979, this time with nine people arrested. Following a two-month undercover investigation, officers described the area as a “haven for prostitution and homosexual activity,” and again baited people frequenting the rest stop. A young man from Meridian, Oklahoma, assaulted an undercover officer who attempted to arrest him for allegedly making a sexual advance.¹² Undercover operations continued from time to time, but the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, Logan County Sheriff’s Department, and the Oklahoma Transportation Department failed to clean up the rest area for very long. Officials tried to police the area by keeping it closed to traffic every evening at sundown starting in August of 1982.¹³ By the 1990s, the stop closed permanently.

The Union Truck Stop, located at Interstate 40 and Morgan Road, was also a popular highway spot for cruising. It contained a gas station, restaurant, and restroom that remained open all night long, and it always seemed to be teeming with visitors. Hustlers found plenty of work at Union Truck Stop, and the area was well known as a convenient place for anonymous sex. In fact, many married gay and bisexual men used the Union Truck Stop for sex, as it provided a convenient shield behind which the motives of their visit might be concealed.¹⁴ This was also a dangerous place for gay and

¹¹ “Police to Continue Park Surveillance,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/5/1973, 65.

¹² “2-Month Probe Ends---Rest Stop Raid Nets 9,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/4/1979.

¹³ “Criminal Activities Take Break at I-35 Rest Stop,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/8/1982, 17.

¹⁴ Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005.

bisexual men to congregate, however. Stories of male prostitutes robbing, assaulting, and even killing some of the visitors were not uncommon.¹⁵

Although normally associated with larger gay subcultures in cities like San Francisco, bathhouses existed all across the United States, and they operated primarily for the same purpose -- to create a smorgasbord of anonymous sex for gay and bisexual men. The Renaissance Athletic Club was Oklahoma City's first and only bathhouse, and it catered exclusively to gay men. Known affectionately as "The RAC," Renaissance was located across from Oklahoma City University at 1704 Northwest 23rd Street. Owned by Richard Garcia, the RAC was open by 1979 and offered patrons a variety of water-based enjoyments, such as a sunning patio, an indoor pool, a steam room, and a Jacuzzi. The RAC was from the beginning a place where frequent, anonymous, and easy sexual hookups could take place, and it offered patrons exotic entertainments like a sling room¹⁶ and a large screen video room to watch pornographic videos. In addition, a shop was located inside that sold sex toys, magazines, poppers¹⁷, and sex lubricants of all measure. Patrons could buy admission by the hour or by the day, and Monday was always "buddy night," a promotion that kept the RAC packed with men of all ages and appetites. Open twenty-four-hours-a-day, the RAC often saw promiscuous young men engage in multiple

¹⁵ "Man Reports Abduction, \$50 Theft." *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/17/1975, 15; "Police Doubt Murder Suspect." *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/15/1976, 17; "Missing Man's Body Discovered." *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/24/1980, 1; "Robbery Broached As Death Motive." *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/27/1980, 13.

¹⁶ A sling room housed various chain- and leather-supported straps in which men were suspended so as to provide users with a plethora of sexual positions.

¹⁷ Slang term for amyl-nitrate, a substance inhaled by users that relaxed the soft muscles of the body, making intercourse more comfortable and pleasurable.

sexual relationships on a nightly basis. Renaissance closed in 1986 due to a decline in business attributed to increased awareness of AIDS, but while it was open, it was the most outrageous source of raw sex available for gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City.¹⁸

The danger for those caught at parks, truck stops, or rest areas searching for sex escalated by the late 1960s and 1970s in Oklahoma City. Until the 1960s, those arrested might be charged in municipal court with disorderly conduct, pay a fine, and never look back. The police and district attorneys probably preferred that, as it generated income from the fines, served as a deterrent if only a mild one, and prevented a huge caseload. With the election of Curtis Harris as County Attorney, charges for sodomy or crime against nature were augmented by misdemeanor charges for lewd acts, and Harris made it his business to harass gay men whenever possible. The Oklahoma City vice squad took an unprecedented interest in searching for homosexual congregation points and social spots. They employed new tactics, such as infiltration and undercover work, which resulted in more arrests of gay men for sex related offenses than ever before. In addition, a defendant could count on his name and address being mentioned in the *Daily Oklahoman* in conjunction with headlines like “lewd” or “moral complaints,” and occasionally they listed his place of employment as well. However, the fact that gay men reestablished circuits of private sex in public places---at truck stops, public parks, a bathhouse, and even in municipal office buildings---and continued to frequent them in the

¹⁸ Victor Gorin, telephone interview by author, 8/11/2005; See advertisements for the RAC in the *Gayly Oklahoman*, (November 1983).

face of this pressure indicates that they fought back on their own terms and made the best of a bad situation.

While gay and bisexual men undoubtedly faced a very hostile political and social climate in Oklahoma City by the 1970s, the landscape was not devoid of brave men who openly challenged their oppression and worked to end discrimination. While continuing to frequent parks or truck stops was an important, if passive form of resistance, some members of the Oklahoma City gay male world took an overt approach. Local activist Paul Thompson remembers being arrested by vice detective extraordinaire Kenneth Smith in 1969 simply for kissing a few friends on the neck at The Cleaners, a bar he owned. The Cleaners had been under surveillance apparently, and when Thompson stepped outside to go home, police cars surrounded him and officers arrested him for his “lewd and lascivious” public behavior. At that juncture, paying a fine and simply getting on with things was not possible for Thompson:

At the time, if gay people were arrested in a gay bar, they always just went and paid the fine, because you didn't dare go to court. If you didn't fight it there was a good chance that your name wouldn't be used (in the paper), unless it was pretty heinous. I just wasn't used to being treated that way, and I wasn't...going to be! I was very nervous about it but I got a lawyer, and went to court. The city statute at the time said, ‘nobody shall behave in public in a way that shall be considered lewd and lascivious.’ What...does that mean? It could not be legal because it put the interpretation of the law up to the policeman instead of the court. We weren't going to plead innocent! (After hearing the officer's testimony), the judge asked, ‘is that all that happened?’ and the police officer said ‘well, something was going on in the back.’ The judge said, ‘are there any charges here on that?’ and the officer said ‘no’, so the judge dismissed the case. This was a watershed event because gay people had never gone down and protested being arrested.¹⁹

¹⁹ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

Ralph Prevette also recalled a brief encounter with police shortly after he arrived in Oklahoma City in 1966. He and several friends were pulled over by the police after leaving Lee's Lounge one night. The officers made a disparaging remark about the "faggot in the back seat," and threatened to take him downtown for investigation. Ralph gained all of his street smarts in California, and he called their bluff: "I replied that I knew all about the infamous elevator ride down at the station, so if I had a mark on me in the morning I would have all kinds of lawyers down there. They ran over people who would buy into it, but if you stood up for yourself....They were bullies mostly."²⁰

Other forms of resistance were more subtle but rather effective in the long run. This was especially true of gay men visiting popular though controversial places like the Roadhouse. Veteran Oklahoma City bar owner Arnold Lee opened the Roadhouse Supper Club on January 3rd, 1970, at a location on the grounds of what is now Frontier City on Interstate 35, between Hefner Road and 122nd Street. Frontier City was a struggling amusement park in 1970, already a decade old and not exactly a keynote attraction in central Oklahoma. As a result, the owners welcomed virtually any business or novelty that might bring people to the area and gave the tenant a great deal of leeway, a situation that seemed tailor-made for Arnold Lee. The Roadhouse was in many respects the sum product of all that Lee learned in dealing with authorities of all hues in Oklahoma City. Its location outside of Oklahoma City limits -- barely -- meant that the club remained immune to the harassment from city vice detectives who plagued Lee's Lounge only a few years earlier. In addition, the Roadhouse provided food for customers, something Arnold's earlier clubs did not. As a result, Lee obtained a

²⁰ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005.

restaurant license, which was much less expensive than a liquor-only license, and it allowed him to serve alcohol anyway. The restaurant license also meant that the presence of younger men and the occasional minor was not ostensibly illegal and did not draw attention from county authorities.²¹

Fate and a little luck helped Arnold get over the hump as well. Years earlier, Arnold and a high-ranking law enforcement official were involved in a sexual encounter. That official agreed to leave the Roadhouse alone if Arnold could make the business successful enough to draw gay and bisexual men away from the downtown area for good.²² The Roadhouse remained open until 1978, and it was arguably the most important institution in the metropolitan area for gay men to gather, socialize, and present themselves as a gay community after the crackdown of the 1960s.

The Roadhouse was a cross between Arnold's first successful venture, Lee's Lounge, and his second nightclub, the Continental Club. Although open only on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights, which were the most lucrative nights of the week for bars anyway, the Roadhouse generated a great deal of income. Lee capitalized on his restaurant license by serving liquor in the secluded "Cave" to those of age, sometimes until dawn, and provided food to all patrons, which made the club wildly popular with people who left other drinking establishments that closed by law at midnight. For Arnold, it must have been quite gratifying to be beyond the reaches of Oklahoma City police after years of arrests. Linking opportunity and need, Lee used the club to make a lot of money and give gay and bisexual men that eschewed the downtown area, which

²¹ Terressa Terrell, email interview, 3/22/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005.

²² Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005.

was growing increasingly more dangerous.²³ It also bridged the gap between the age of downtown cruising and sex, which was rapidly on its way out, and the birth of the 39th Street Glitter Alley, something that will be discussed further in a moment.

Drag was a staple at the Road House, just as it had been at Lee's Lounge and the Continental. In fact, Arnold's use of female impersonators solidified the link between drag and queer clubs in Oklahoma City, one that continues to date. One of the most popular and talented queens to work at the Road House, Terressa Terrell, remembers that "Terry M. took me to see the 'beauties,' and I was awed and totally loved it. I was hired one week later by Arnold Lee and worked there until the night it closed, ten years later." Terrell was also underage -- only 15 years old when she was first allowed to enter the Road House by Larry "Fuzzy" Braker, Arnold's lover. Arnold told her to get a fake identification, use Main Street in Las Vegas as her address, and to get busy. Terrell did just that, booking shows for the Road House and winning "Entertainer of the Year" at the annual balls Lee sponsored until the Road House closed.²⁴

A large number of drag queens worked at the Roadhouse, and apparently the queens formed an Imperial Family,²⁵ something usually limited to larger urban gay

²³ Ibid. See chapter five for a discussion of urban renewal and its role in making downtown Oklahoma City almost exclusively a haven for hustlers by the mid-1970s.

²⁴ Terressa Terrell, email interviews 3/22/2005 and 4/12/2005

²⁵ An imperial family was usually led by an older, experienced pageant queen who took new girls under her wing and introduced them to the world of drag. The relationships were frequently, for effect, marked off by titles of royalty---The Imperial House of..." for instance. Imperial Courts were noted as much for their charitable works as they were for tremendous drag -- and incredibly competitive rivalries. An excellent discussion of the foundation of the Imperial Court System is Michael Robert Gorman, *The Empress Is A Man: Stories from the Life and Times of Jose Sarria* (Binghamton, New York: Haworth

subcultures like Chicago or New York City. Terressa Terrell was a show director at the Roadhouse for a decade, and she brought many talented performers to the club, some that owner Arnold Lee could not persuade to come himself. “My ‘house’ was the Imperial Family of Lady Topaz, Elizabeth, Brandi, and Cinnamon” remembers Terressa. Many of the girls competed in pageants all over the United States. The exotic array of talents at the Roadhouse included Miss Topaz -- Jack Henderson -- who functioned as Terressa’s drag mother, and was extremely unusual in that she only impersonated African-American celebrities. “We called her the ‘Imperial Negress,’ and she was so talented.”²⁶

If the impersonators at the Roadhouse could be excused for looking at the club through rose-colored glasses, the general public was less forgiving. Derisively known by some patrons as the “RoadHog,” the Roadhouse provided gay men with a safe environment in which to be gay, but it was never as palatial as others remembered. The air-conditioning rarely worked, a fact that made partying in the hot Oklahoma summer months almost unbearable in a packed restaurant. The toilets frequently malfunctioned. It did, however, offer patrons a source of community at a time when that was sorely lacking in Oklahoma City:

The RoadHog had drag shows every weekend, and that was one of the things we did for something to do. Because of the circumstances of being gay, if you were openly gay and you wanted to go out for an evening, and go out and have dinner, unless you were kind of a prissy little upper-class wanna-be gay person, you had to go to some kind of a gay restaurant like this one. It wasn’t all that clean, and the service wasn’t all that good, but you just kind of held your nose and ate the

Press, 1998), 1-5. See also *Paris Is Burning*, a documentary by Jennie Livingston about drag balls and the social hierarchies within groups of queens.

²⁶ Terressa Terrell, email interview by author, 3/22/2005; For the importance of a show director to ensuring the success of a drag troupe, see Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor, *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

food anyway because there were no other choices. To go out for an evening or a weekend, to go to a crummy restaurant with lousy food ---you took that tight corset of (being) somebody else off, and got to be yourself for a while.²⁷

The Roadhouse played an important role in introducing many young gay and bisexual men into a queer culture not found in small towns all across the state, but not all of the new visitors were impressed. Indeed, a distinct love-hate relationship developed in regard to Arnold Lee and the Roadhouse for many gay and bisexual men. Oklahoma City political activist Keith Smith was mortified when he first stepped into the Roadhouse, his first foray into any gay bar:

I came here when I was still living in Alva. An older friend who was out (we weren't) brought us with a bunch of our straight friends. That place scared the shit out of me, because of the drag queens, and I thought "O.K., I'm not really gay, because I don't want to be like them and I wasn't attracted to them." I think that is what a lot of young gay people do, without role models, you don't know what "gay" really is, at least back then. They were fine---very flaming and loud--but I was not attracted to them, and I knew that I didn't want to be like them.²⁸

Another long-time Oklahoma City resident remembers that the quality of the shows also left something to be desired:

If Arnold had a bar you knew three things about them---they were going to be filthy, the drinks were going to be watered, and there would be chicken everywhere you looked and thus chicken hawks. And bad drag shows too. The ultimate Arnold Lee drag show...The night Judy Garland died, Arnold promised them at Lee's Lounge that if they let him do his all-night tribute to Judy Garland, that he would never perform Judy Garland again. A couple of years later at the Road House, he comes out doing Judy Garland, and (a patron) at the back of the room stands up with a wonderful fishwife voice and says, "you bitch, you promised us if we listened to you do Judy Garland all night you'd never do her again---you lying sow." So he gets off the stage, and this black queen starts performing Tina Turner. She danced very well---couldn't lip-sync...but that

²⁷ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

²⁸ Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005.

didn't matter---but at the end she did the splits, executed it perfectly, and everything would've just been peachy if her leotard hadn't split and his (genitalia) hadn't fallen out on stage. All of the people in the front rows were dykes and they yelled "aaaarghhhh!" That was the (typical) Arnold Lee drag show. "Professional" wasn't in there anywhere.²⁹

A number of gay and bisexual men believed that drag actually set back the movement for queer acceptance by the community at large. The makeup, gowns, and campy routines stereotyped all gay men as secretly harboring a desire to be female, to say nothing about the perceived lack of masculine toughness that drag projected. Some gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents chose to bypass the Roadhouse, and Arnold Lee also alienated members of the community he so brazenly courted. Known for permitting teenagers into his clubs, for allowing his establishments to remain filthy, and for a number of ethically questionable business deals, Lee provoked a visceral response on the part of LGBT activists who preferred to cast an image of Oklahoma homosexuals that was decidedly more sedate and responsible.³⁰

Overall, what the Roadhouse and its owner lacked in professionalism, they made up for in sheer chutzpah, and they brought a volume of business to the club that made it a landmark in the gay community for almost a decade. It might not have been perfect, but the Roadhouse provided gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents a place to call their own, free from constant surveillance and harassment by the city police, where they could let their hair down and be openly gay if only for a few hours. The Roadhouse quickly

²⁹ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005.

³⁰ Joseph Kirk, email interview by author, 1/12/2005; Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, 1/12/2005, 2/19/2005, and 6/29/2005; Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004; Linda Cole, telephone interview by author, 6/29/2005; Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005.; GJP, interview by author, 3/18/2005.

became the perfect foil for authorities hoping to crush the gay social scene in Oklahoma City---it was located outside of city limits, it was technically a restaurant instead of a bar, and it was located in a frontier theme park that at the time was struggling to increase attendance. The Roadhouse gave the gay male world in Oklahoma City an anchor at a time when its sexual and psychic dimensions were in transition.

True to form in the history of Arnold Lee's clubs, the Roadhouse died an ignoble death in 1980 when Frontier City refused to renew the club's lease. A legion of reasons led to its demise, but the primary ones included several drug overdoses involving minors -- one being fatal -- community fatigue, and expanding competition by other clubs in Oklahoma City.³¹ In fact, during the mid-1970s a number of new bars opened in Oklahoma City proper, all of which slowly siphoned away customers from the Roadhouse. Lee Burrus opened The Rusty Nail in the early 1970s, and it became a popular hangout for straight-acting gay men. Following his experience at the Roadhouse, Keith Smith and friends traveled to the Rusty Nail and instantly felt more comfortable: "Later that same night, we went to (The Rusty Nail) and everybody looked totally normal so I went, 'Oh, we might ought to rethink this!' There were a lot of good-looking men."³² In 1973, John Magevar opened Disco 36, the first club in Oklahoma City that provided laser light shows and fogged dance floors. Located at Northwest 36th and Shartel, Disco 36 effectively put Burrus' Rusty Nail out of business. Undaunted, Burrus opened Huggy Bares in an old straight beer bar located on Northwest 39th Street.

³¹ Terressa Terrell, email interview, 3/22/2005. Her lover, Eddie Robinson, died of a massive PCP overdose in the club in November of 1977. His body was later discovered in a stalled car on Hefner Road, near the RoadHouse.

³² Ibid.

It offered patrons go-go boys in suspended cages, but it did not last long either. Local drag legend Tony Sinclair started a club in the late 1970s on May Avenue called Tony's Club, which he eventually moved to Western Avenue and rechristened Tony's Club North. Tony's Club gave the Roadhouse some competition for the best drag shows in town, and the animosity between the two businesses escalated when a Roadhouse queen won best talent at Tony's annual Halloween Ball. "Tony hollered 'and our winner is the FANTABULOUS.....the Uh...fantabu.....OH BITCH COME ON AND GET YOUR DAMN AWARDS....Miss TERRESSA ladies and gentlemen' to a THUNDEROUS applause. I took Ms. Arnold Lee the huge trophy, and she was very happy."³³ All of these bars provided centrally located alternatives to the Roadhouse. The decline in business was steep, and the Roadhouse closed in 1979.

With the demise of the Roadhouse and various other short-lived drinking establishments by 1980, there were approximately three gay bars in Oklahoma City frequented by a majority of gay and bisexual men---the Circa 2201, the Free Spirit, and Saddle Tramps. Originally owned by John Magevar and Larry Haggard, the Circa 2201 opened in December of 1972. "The Circa was by far the biggest bar in town, and it made money---we're talking about dedicated alcoholics here!"³⁴ With Saddle Tramps, and entirely new generation of gay and bisexual men were introduced to Gil Ray, whose brief flirtation with retirement did not suit him. Later, Gil Ray, Larry Crosby, and Gil's lover Richard bought the Circa and moved Saddle Tramps up to that location. The Free Spirit was a discotheque located on Classen Boulevard in a large old Episcopal church

³³ "Optimism Provides Business Success for Gay Entrepreneur," *Hard News Online*, V. 2, n, 28, 1/8/2004; Terressa Terrell, email interview, 4/12/2005.

³⁴ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005.

building. Patrons usually referred to it as the Evil Spirit, and more than one commented on what bad taste it was for a gay disco to locate in a church.³⁵ Two of those bars---the Circa and Saddle Tramps---were located on Northwest 39th Street, between Pennsylvania and May Avenue. By this time, the Roadhouse was closed, and although the Free Spirit was packed with people, its location on Classen Boulevard, surrounded by residential neighborhoods, kept it from developing into an institution, one that would draw gay and lesbian residents from all over the state, every night. A new dance club was about to open, however, that would establish 39th Street and its series of bars, stores, and restaurants as “the Strip,” or “Glitter Alley.”

Angles opened on September 15th, 1982, and was from the beginning a club that drew crowds easily. Located at 2117 NW 39th behind the Habana Inn, the club was started by Don Hill and Scott Wilson, two out-of-state businessmen who took a huge gamble when opening the place. Hill and Wilson, then lovers, vacationed all over the United States visiting popular clubs, especially those in New York and San Francisco. Both men loved Studio 54, and it was here one night while dancing beside Calvin Klein and Grace Jones that they first noticed one of the club’s unusual amenities -- moveable trusses. They came back to Oklahoma City and commissioned Bart Shedeck, one of Oklahoma’s premier architects, to design a club unlike anything ever seen in this state. Moveable trusses with a variety of lighting systems complemented a prototype sound system designed by Klipsch, the master of European club sound systems. Shedeck designed Angles to accommodate large crowds by maximizing traffic flow, and he made sure to include provisions for future expansions of lighting, sound, and video systems. It

³⁵ Ibid.

was the most ambitious ground-up construction project ever attempted on behalf of Oklahoma City's gay community, and travelers from all over the United States expressed amazement that such a facility existed in Oklahoma.³⁶

In addition to being the most modern club in Oklahoma City, Angles also offered unparalleled entertainment for the gay and bisexual male community. All of the popular high-energy disco acts of the era came to Angles, including the Weather Girls and Dead or Alive. Disco divas Sylvester and Divine, and the gender-bending Boy George performed at the club as well. Although a historic connection existed in Oklahoma City between gay clubs and drag, Angles refused to welcome female impersonators initially. Wilson and Hill wanted to model their club after Studio 54 and other popular dance clubs on both coasts, and drag was not a staple in those places. Trying to provide entertainment, on an ongoing basis, for a club open seven days a week probably proved to be a challenge, and it led them to embrace the medium. Fritz Capone served as emcee and show director for a mid-week revue, but the weekend entertainment left something to be desired. The owners turned to drag icon Ginger Lamar, who started performing regularly at Angles, and she made an immediate impact.

I ran into Scott Wilson. He talked to me about coming to work for him. That was about 1983. Angles had opened a year before, and they didn't want drag of any kind in their bar. They didn't like it, but that was a big time for drag. In the 80's drag was very big. Angles had to add it to make their club successful. They had a show on Sunday night and hosting---I don't remember her name, I wouldn't mention it if I did, because she was horrible. And when the show was announced, everybody would get up and leave. So, I said 'I can make this work...I guarantee you within a month this place will be packed.' By the second Sunday I was there, it was full. I did not work with a cast then, I was the only regular on Sunday night. But it went over so well, they started moving some of their Tuesday night entertainers in. And we slowly built a cast for Sunday night & established a

³⁶ "Angles Celebrates 20 Years," *The Gayly Oklahoman* (15 September 2002), 1, 7.

show. It was very successful. And, whether it's quoted or not, I dare say, it has never been as successful since I have not been there.³⁷

From the beginning, Angles was a controversial venture, and many in the Oklahoma City gay community believed that something was amiss. Rumors flew that a consortium in Dallas owned the bar, and that as a satellite club it would never be loyal to the Oklahoma City gay community. Others believed something even more sinister accounted for the secrecy surrounding Angles' construction. Many pointed to possible mafia connections, as "that bar never made the kind of money -- ever -- that would build that kind of home (for Hill and Wilson) on the golf course at the Oklahoma City Country Club."³⁸

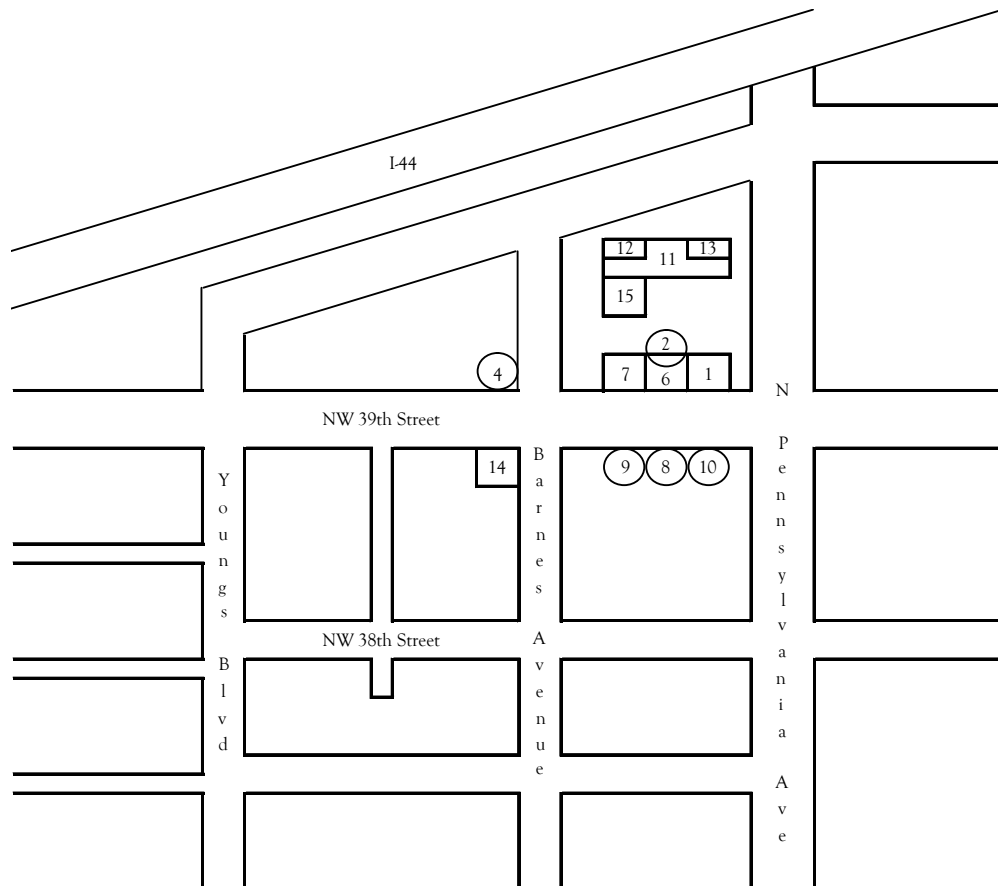
Rumors aside, the presence of Angles fundamentally changed the character of the 39th Street area. The high-energy dance club brought scores of young gay and bisexual men to the area, which meant an increase in business volume for the other queer clubs already located there -- Saddle Tramps, the Circa, and the Outrigger. Located almost directly behind Angles, the Habanna Inn -- formerly a mid-size travel lodge that offered straight supper shows at the dank nightclub housed inside -- quickly became a queer resort noted in gay travel guides all over the country and a safe haven for intoxicated revelers. A number of new bars opened along the small stretch of 39th Street -- Night

³⁷ Ibid.; See the "Ginger Speaks" section at www.gingerlamar.com for her take on Angles and the 1980s club scene; Victor Gorin and Helen Bedd, "Exclusive Interview: Ginger Lamar," *Gayly Oklahoman* (November 1989); "Fritz Capone: The Queen of Chaos," *Gayly Oklahoman* (March 1989), 10-11.

³⁸ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005.

Figure Four

The Transformation of Northwest 39th Street, 1980-1990



- 1 – Angles
- 2 – Saddle Tramps (ORIGINAL)
- 3 – Outrigger
- 4 – Circa 2201 Club (Tramps today)
- 5 – Oasis Community Center
- 6 – The Park
- 7 – The Wreck Room
- 8 – The Night-Life Club
- 9 – The Warehouse Juice Parlor

- 10 – The Kozan
- 11 – Habanna Inn Complex
- 12 – Gushers Bar
- 13 – Finish Line
- 14 – Bijou
- 15 – Ledo

Life Club, the Warehouse Juice Parlor, and the Bijou Club. Angles' owners Scott Wilson and Don Hill also added two other clubs to their arsenal, the Park and an under-21 establishment called the Wreck Room. Although the Bijou and the Warehouse Juice Parlor were not open long, new clubs moved in just as others closed. By 1988, the Habana had a gay bar inside its confines -- Gushers Club -- owned by Lee Burris. Two years later, a gay country and western bar known as the Finish Line also located within the Habana.³⁹ By the mid-1980s, all but a handful of the gay bars in Oklahoma City were located on 39th Street. With the destruction of the downtown sexual and social landscape via urban renewal, the Strip, or Glitter Alley, was now the anchor for Oklahoma City's gay and bisexual male subculture.

Not all of the local residents found the changes on 39th Street as exciting. The number of patrons going down to the area increased dramatically with the opening of Angles, especially among the under-30 set. The area became a magnet for gay and lesbians all over the Oklahoma City metropolitan area, and brought with it the aspects of entertainment districts that most business owners could live without -- drugs, sex in parking lots, and trespassing on local residential areas to name only a few. In addition, the revelry did not end at midnight, which was always the custom, but rather continued on until after 2 AM. This shift in what might be called an "entertainment schedule" did not sit well with local residents, many of whom were over sixty-five, especially on weeknights. During November and December of 1982, the Oklahoma City council received numerous complaints about the bars near 39th and Pennsylvania, and police

³⁹ Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005; Victor Gorin, telephone conversation with author, 8/11/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; "Optimism Provides Business Success for Gay Entrepreneur." *Hard News Online* (www.hnokc.com), v. 2 n. 28 (1/8/2004).

spokesmen Tom Mundy noted that the police received “an inordinate number of disturbance calls” during a six-week period, which coincided with the opening of Angles. City residents demanded that public nuisance hearings on the private clubs and taverns begin immediately. Val Hawkins represented a consortium of business owners and sixteen homeowners who lived right across the street from Angles, and her group presented the city council with a petition against five clubs on the block. “We are mostly senior citizens in this neighborhood. On my block alone, there are nine people over age 60. They feel intimidated,” Hawkins said. The petition decried the “loud music, foul language, illegal fighting, broken bottles and other litter and improper parking” violations that occurred nightly near her neighborhood.⁴⁰

The City Council was in a rather rough spot, as they felt that they owed the community a fair hearing, but that all of the businesses were properly licensed and the area zoned for commercial use. Ward 5 Councilman Jim Scott noted that “If a citizen complains, we’re obligated to listen, but we can’t just declare something a public nuisance because we don’t like wet T-shirt contests.” The bars on 39th Street fell into Ward 2, represented at that time by Marge Feighny. She toured four of the clubs after she received Hawkins’ petition and found the charges lacking. “I spoke with the club owners and the patrons. They couldn’t have been nicer to me. I reminded them that the residents of the area had been there a long time and their rights should be considered.” Even more telling, while Feighny and a delegation from OHR toured the clubs, the police

⁴⁰ “Public Nuisance Ruling Causes Headaches for City Council,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/21/1982, 35.

arrived to investigate a complaint made against them for making too much noise, an event that Feighny found telling. The council tabled the discussion for a week.⁴¹

Although the sexuality of those involved was supposedly not the issue, it was interesting that the public expected immediate action against these private clubs “which cater to persons whose mode of living is completely alien to residents of this area.” Hawkins added, “I have nothing but sympathy and pity for true gays, who I believe are victims of a hormonal imbalance.” Gay bar owners were also upset, because the allegations Hawkins raised in her petition brought local news cameras to the area, ostensibly to investigate whether crowds were getting out of hand, but also to publicize the “dark” side of Oklahoma City’s nightlife. “Since then,” noted Night Life bar owner Barbara Swepston, “I’ve had a lot of trouble with incidents in which three or four straight men have walked in and said, ‘Hey, we heard this was a gay girls’ bar. We just want to see what its like.’ Well, we’re not a side show. We’re a private club.” Apparently the situation spiraled out of control because more gay and bisexual men roamed the streets along Glitter Alley than the clubs could accommodate. As a result, groups of people who either could not afford a club membership or were unable to get inside congregated in the parking lots, brought their own liquor and drank, or had sex in cars. Hawkins noted that some of these “undesirables” ran through the streets in front of her house nude, and she discovered one young man urinating on her shrubbery. Night Life owner Barbara Swepston tried to appease Hawkins, and even offered to purchase a fence to

⁴¹ Ibid.

place between her property and the club. “She made us all look like a bunch of sex fiends.”⁴²

Incidents at Angles also made other bar owners leery, and they had a rather chilly relationship with the Angles crew. Gil Ray, long-time bar owner and community activist, remembers how relieved he was to be away from Angles following Saddle Tramps’ relocation. After operating Saddle Tramps for many years, Gil Ray and his partners grew tired of fighting with local business and homeowners over noise and trespassing complaints once Angles opened. They purchased a building up the street---the old Circa 2201 club that Angles coveted as well---and planned to move Saddle Tramps there. Fearing some kind of backlash from Angles, Gil Ray asked for and received escorts from the Oklahoma City police department while moving to the new location, which they rechristened Saddle Tramps West. “I called and told Bill Citty (chief now) that we were going back up the street and thank God we were going to be away from those noisemakers (Angles). I asked him (Citty) to put somebody out there so we could move in peace. 17 trucks moved the club one early morning.”⁴³

By all accounts, Angles made a lot of noise in the community, literally and figuratively, and as a result the Oklahoma City police stepped up their presence along Northwest 39th Street, a presence that made all parties involved uncomfortable. Between November, 1982, and January, 1983, the Oklahoma City police regularly made visits at Angles, and employees received citations for everything from serving drunken patrons, to making an illegal guest list and violating noise ordinances. The police cited

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005.

numerous complaints from residents and obvious examples of lewd behavior on the part of patrons as the primary reasons for their frequent visits.⁴⁴

Angles patrons, and its owners Don Hill and Scott Wilson, described the patrols somewhat differently. The corporation under which Angles applied for all city construction inspections and liquor licenses was Cotton-Eyed Joe's, a deliberate decision by Wilson and Hill to deceive people into thinking that Angles would join the legions of country and western bars all over Oklahoma City. Once it became known that Angles was actually a gay disco, the police "became enraged" and initiated a campaign of terror that threatened to destroy the fledgling business. According to patrons, the police over-patrolled parking lots and streets in front of Angles, sometimes parking five or six squad cars by the entrance. Once inside, they intimidated guests, cited employees for phantom ordinances like not having a kitchen stove with four working burners on the premises, and turned stand-alone video games over to check for permits while guests were playing. They cited the club for "disturbing the peace" innumerable times, even though Wilson and Hill hired sound engineers from Oklahoma City and Dallas who secretly and randomly monitored decibel levels outside the club, at all hours, for several months. According to their independent reports, Angles never went over city noise limits. As Wilson and Hill remember, "In the course of the next four months we were cited about 50 or 60 times for various and sundry things. We fought and won every single one of them." More disturbing was the physical violence the police inflicted upon patrons. "When the Police Academy had their latest batch of graduates, three of the more experienced patrolmen brought in 12 rookies on a Saturday night and showed them how

⁴⁴ "Police Document All Checks of Homosexual Bars," *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/5/1983, 21.

to mistreat the gays. They were basically telling them, with us standing right there, ‘Now this is how you handle these people.’ It was sick.” The police discouraged many gay and bisexual men from even entering the club, and this led to a drop in business volume estimated at over 60%.⁴⁵

The tension between gay and bisexual men and the Oklahoma City police boiled over on one night, about four months after Angles first opened, and it fundamentally changed the character of gay and lesbian socialization patterns. According to witnesses, on January 6, 1983, police officers arrested local businessman Robert Tim Gravel as he sat inside Angles, allegedly for public intoxication. How or why they arrived at this conclusion was unclear, as officers singled Gravel out only seconds after entering. Witnesses claimed that officers manhandled Gravel, threw him into a police cruiser, and removed him from the Angles parking lot. What happened next, according to Gravel, was that the officers took him to a dark street, where they verbally and physically abused him. While handcuffed, Officer Van Schuyver hit Gravel in the face, stomped on his foot, and choked him to the point of unconsciousness.⁴⁶ The officers returned to Angles and dumped Gravel in the parking lot. He was in terrible shape, and required extensive medical treatment.⁴⁷

This was not the last alleged incident of violence committed against a gay man in Oklahoma City by police officers. Only ten days after officers accosted Gravel and other

⁴⁵ “Angles Celebrates 20 Years,” *Gayly Oklahoman* (15 September 2002), 1, 7; Quotes from Scott Wilson and Don Hill taken from “Angles’ Owners Speak Out on the City’s Settlement of Federal Lawsuit,” *Gayly Oklahoman* (October 1983), 8-9.

⁴⁶ “Gay Charges Police Abuse,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/22/1983, 19.

⁴⁷ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

guests at Angles, Officers Van Schuyver and Mercer were involved in another violent incident in which the victim charged police brutality. The officers pulled Robert Bigger out of his car near Glitter Alley shortly after he left Angles. Bigger alleged that Van Schuyver and other unidentified officers forced him from the car, smashed his face against it, and beat and kicked him the whole time he was processed at the police station. Mercer stood and watched while the other officers beat Bigger.⁴⁸

In light of these events, gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City believed that the police department was waging war on them. Patrons lived in fear that they might be pulled out of a club, interrogated, beaten, or worse. Even if officers merely over-policed the clubs, the possibility that they might take suspects on long drives down dark alleys, or worse -- see their name in the newspaper -- had a debilitating effect on the gay male subculture in Oklahoma City. Some patrons who suffered abuse during and following the Angles controversy never reported it. As one Oklahoma City attorney reminded us, “Gays who have been abused by police or straights often don’t press charges because they can’t afford to be found out. You must get in touch with the fear that is pervasive in this community. Loss of parental support, friends, jobs---everything goes if you’re identified as a gay person.”⁴⁹ The problems at Angles went beyond simple harassment, though, and many feared that gay and bisexual men might be killed if the abuse continued unabated. “We had CPAs, doctors, members of the straight community, who were

⁴⁸ Quote taken from “Poor Training, Orders Cited As Police Brutality Defense,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/25/1984, 12.

⁴⁹ “Cloud of Fear Hangs Over City’s Homosexual Community,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/2/1983, 31, 34; Joe, interview by author, 3/14/2005; J.L. Asher, interview by author, 9/10/2004; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005; Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005.

willing to testify. We had several professional people who would have a lot to lose, who were willing to testify,” remembered Hill and Wilson.⁵⁰ To be fair, Wilson and Hill and a huge investment to protect, and the 60% drop in business volume would have crippled the new venture, so their motives were not entirely community-oriented. It was for these reasons that Angles, Robert Tim Gravel, and Robert Bigger decided to fight back.

On February 11th, 1983, Cotton-Eyed Joes, Inc., the corporate owners of Angles, filed a federal lawsuit against Oklahoma City alleging that Angles had suffered under an ongoing campaign of terror and harassment since the bar opened. Eric Groves, a former Oklahoma City council member and successful attorney, represented the corporation, shareholder Don Hill, and three employees in the suit, which sought over \$800,000 in damages. A month later, Gravel also hired Eric Groves and filed a federal lawsuit against Oklahoma City seeking over \$8 million in damages. Specifically, Gravel named Mayor Patience Latting and Police Chief Lloyd Gramling for failing to end the police harassment of the gay community along 39th Street, which the suit alleged had occurred since 1979.⁵¹ Robert Bigger sued Oklahoma City for failing to properly train officers and for encouraging officers to physically assault gay men. His federal suit, filed in April of 1984, sought over \$500,000 in damages.⁵²

Van Schuyver denied the allegations at first, saying he did not remember arresting Gravel. He was considered a good police officer, having recently earned a commendation for saving a young girl’s life and was named the OKC Kiwanis Club police officer of the year in 1981. Shortly after attorneys filed the lawsuits, Van

⁵⁰ “Angles’ Owners Speak Out,” 9.

⁵¹ *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/22/1983, 19.

⁵² “Poor Training...,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/25/1984, 12.

Schuyver decided to work in dispatch instead of patrolling the streets. The Oklahoma City police department conducted its own investigation in May of 1983, during which Van Schuyver testified that he did not believe the allegations against him “were very serious.” However, he believed them serious enough to resign before the Police Disciplinary Review Board recommended any sanctions against him. “They’re not jumping on me and they’re not coming out to support me...Nobody puts their neck on the line. That kind of shocked me,” he told a reporter shortly after his resignation became public.⁵³

Even more shocking was an admission Van Schuyver made in his defense of the Bigger lawsuit. According to Van Schuyver, the chief of police “specifically advised” him and Mercer to treat those arrested along 39th street in a rough fashion. Given that Van Schuyver admitted he felt betrayed by the lack of support offered him by the Oklahoma City Police Department, it certainly is possible that he exaggerated, but this was damaging for the city. In order to expedite the matter, Scott Wilson and Don Hill made an offer to drop their lawsuit, provided Oklahoma City made several important though painless concessions, and the city agreed. On September 13th, 1983, the Oklahoma City Council agreed to pay the owners of Angles \$1 in damages plus almost \$29,000 in legal fees. Part of the settlement also included a permanent injunction against the Oklahoma City police to respect the civil rights of Angles patrons and employees as well as sensitivity training for current and future officers. The City Council settled the Gravel civil rights lawsuit as well, paying him \$25,000 rather than open Oklahoma City to a massive jury award that municipal counselor Walter Powell cautioned might have

⁵³ “City Officer Quits With Suit Pending,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/20/1983, 105.

“no limit.” Some council members objected to what they felt was an open-ended right to revelry, but Powell assured council members that this was the correct, and most expedient, resolution.⁵⁴

Although on paper the settlement would seem but a slap on the wrist for the police department, its effect was striking. The promise to respect the civil rights of Angles’ employees and customers in reality amounted to a wide-ranging freedom from extensive police presence all along 39th Street between Pennsylvania and May Avenue. The police agreed not to harass or otherwise shake down club patrons. The settlement ended what gay and bisexual residents considered illegal searches, invasions of privacy, and false arrests, and the police steered clear of the area if for no other reason than to avoid any hint of such charges. The Angles decision, and the courage shown by employees, the owners, Robert Gravel, and Robert Bigger, made Northwest 39th Street the safest spot for gays and lesbians in perpetuity. The owners of Angles, Don Hill and Scott Wilson, faced the issue with tremendous courage, because neither was out before they filed the federal lawsuit. “Before we filed the suit, Don’s and my parents were in the dark on our sexual preference, to us being lovers, and to our business interest in the club. We had to come out totally to them...We had to pay some prices, but we felt that you’ve got to make a stand somewhere.”⁵⁵

⁵⁴ “Poor Training...,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/25/1984, 12; “Proposal to Settle Suit Angers City Councilmen,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/7/1983, 9; “Council Settles Out of Court With Club for Homosexuals,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/14/1983, 15; “Angles’ Owners Speak Out...,” 9; “City Council Agrees to Pay \$25,000 To Settle Police Brutality Lawsuit,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/19/1983, 21.

⁵⁵ “Angles’ Owners Speak Out...,” 9-10.

If the troubles at Angles in 1982 did nothing else, they kept the Oklahoma City gay male world on the minds and lips of local residents in an unprecedented way. Until that time, only negative stories involving Oklahoma City gay and bisexual residents received attention in the newspaper and on the news. In January of 1983, the *Daily Oklahoman*, on the heels of the Angles controversy, allowed three investigative reporters to “infiltrate” the gay world in Oklahoma, with a heavy emphasis on Oklahoma City. They spoke to business owners, gathered hundreds of hours of interviews with gay men and women, and otherwise observed the nuances of gay socialization for over four months. Articles explored everything from bars to female impersonation, to the “closet” and to AIDS, and they did so candidly. The series was entitled “Oklahoma’s Gays: The Invisible Minority,” an unfortunate choice of words that was neither supported by the information presented nor the previous ninety years of Oklahoma City’s gay and bisexual history.⁵⁶ However, the groundbreaking series provided Oklahoma City residents with the first substantial, sustained, and somewhat positive contact with their gay subculture.

The first article contained a number of references to the large size of Oklahoma City’s gay population, and described how so many gay residents were proud to be gay and optimistic about the changes that occurred in Oklahoma City over time. The second article made note of the Angles lawsuit and the “cloud of fear” hanging over the community as the result of gay bashing and threats of violence that seemed to be everywhere. That same edition also included an article dealing with the invisible killer – AIDS -- and its expected horrific impact on the gay male world. That article featured quotes from Oklahoma State University sociologist Chuck Edgely who argued that

⁵⁶ The articles appeared in the *Daily Oklahoman* during the week of May 1-4, 1983.

Oklahoma gays were “the most repressed in the nation” and “constantly are put on the defensive about their sexual orientation.” The fourth article detailed the pivotal role that gay bars and gay churches played in providing the gay community with a sense of belonging and spiritual wholeness. The final article dealt with the ways that gays and lesbians fought the establishment -- legally and politically -- and cited bars as the gay and bisexual answer to town hall meetings.⁵⁷

Although informative and well-written, the articles left a bad taste in the mouths of some of those who agreed to interviews. It brought attention to the 39th Street bars, much of it unwelcome for closeted gay and bisexual men. The tone of the articles also incorrectly suggested that a majority of gay and lesbian residents in Oklahoma City were miserable, and ignored many of the hard-fought gains that long-time residents had pursued. Staff writers Terrie Clifford, Jim Killackey, and Kevin Stoner, all heterosexual according to their article, concluded their research with the headline, “Even at Its Best, the Gay Life Is a Hard One.” Stoner related that “many times, when festivities were at their height, I couldn’t help but discern an underlying sadness, an almost frantic attempt to have a good time. If ever there was a Cinderella society, rushing to beat midnight, this is it.” Jim Killackey found that an incredible tension ran throughout the community -- between “excitement and anguish...resolve and despondency...love and self-hate” -- that prevented gays from ever living fulfilled lives. Terrie Clifford, the lone female investigator, came away lamenting the fact that although educating the public was the

⁵⁷ “Gays Open Closet Door,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/1/1983, 1; “Cloud of Fear Hangs Over City’s Homosexual Community,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/2/1983, 31; “Other Troubles Tend to Pale at the Threat of Aids,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/2/1983, 34; “Bars Center of Gay Life,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/3/1983, 21; “Gays Flexing Political Muscles, But Remain Divided on Strategy,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/4/1983, 9.

primary goal for all involved in the series, few of the participants related experiences not infused with a great deal of pain and sadness. She concluded, “The only clear impression I went away with is that their existence here cannot be an easy one.”⁵⁸

The reaction to the series from readers all across the state was hard to gauge. The *Daily Oklahoman* reprinted nine letters to the editor it received after the series ran, and predictably, eight of those expressed shock or revulsion. Vinita Valle admonished the editor for including a front-page picture of two men embracing in a gay bar. “I cannot believe that there was nothing more important going on in Oklahoma that could have gone in that space with one of the articles...I was also very surprised to read that the gay community here has its own church...how can they believe the Lord condones their sexual preference?” Reverend Dale Vanderburg from Blanchard, Oklahoma, asked “if *The Daily Oklahoman* has turned into the gay headquarters of Oklahoma?...who do you think cares about a bunch of queer people, except other homosexuals?...I for one am sick and tired of the news media building up a bunch of sexual degenerates as if they were the norm and not abnormal and sick.” Other, anonymous readers wished gays would just stay in the closet. “Why can’t they just be ‘people’ and keep their sexual preferences to themselves?” Jane Berryman was the only respondent who praised the *Oklahoman* for “adhering to the primary purpose of any newspaper: to inform the public.”⁵⁹ Although it is impossible to know how many letters the newspaper received in support of the articles or the information they contained, the editor chose to publish primarily the negative

⁵⁸ “Even at Its Best, the Gay Life Is a Hard One,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/4/1983, 37.

⁵⁹ “Readers Respond to Series on Oklahoma’s Gay Community,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/8/1983, 272.

responses. These and other adverse reactions undoubtedly were blows to the community leaders who hoped that by publicizing a small part of their world that tolerance might be forthcoming.⁶⁰

Despite these disappointments, queer residents gained important footholds in Oklahoma City by 1986, both politically and physically. Gay and bisexual men shared a safe, centralized location---Glitter Alley---along which they could go to clubs, socialize, or have community events. Although hardly considered a tolerant atmosphere by most gay and bisexual men, Oklahoma City was more tolerant and open after the Angles' lawsuit, which built upon the efforts of activists and everyday residents to remain visible in the community since the late 1960s. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of OHR, the continued attempts by gay men to start gay bars and businesses, and the Angles lawsuit, was that they demonstrated that the legal system would support them and preserve their rights, albeit grudgingly at times. This made gay and bisexual residents more willing and motivated to pursue the trappings of community normally found in larger metropolitan areas on the east and west coasts.⁶¹

The centrality of bars to the Oklahoma City queer landscape was established early and never quite dissipated. One of the reasons that national gay organizations perceive that Oklahoma City does not have a progressive queer community stems from the centrality of bar culture in Oklahoma City. To be clear, bars are essential elements of socialization and camaraderie in queer communities in any city, but in Oklahoma City

⁶⁰ Gil Ray, telephone follow-up interview by author, 8/29/2005. Ray participated in the survey for the *Daily Oklahoman* and noted how "dark" the pieces seemed to be.

⁶¹ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/24/2004; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005.

they often appear to be the *only* sources of community. The centrality of gay bars in Oklahoma City stems from the unique position of freedom and relative openness that gay and gay-friendly bars enjoyed in Oklahoma City in the 1940s and 1950s. Gay bars were the only places where closeted gay and bisexual men, or even the openly gay, could go at that juncture. That they remained open for so long, and received no more harassment from the community and authorities than most other bars and taverns, made them galvanizing institutions within the gay community, and many in that community felt that having the bars was enough. Given the wide range of social and political functions served by gay bars in Oklahoma City, that was certainly not an unreasonable assumption. It was in bars that gay and bisexual men weathered the storm of the 1960s, when Curtis Harris and the police stepped up campaigns to rid Oklahoma City of homosexuals, and it was in bars that patrons heard about community events, political information, and raised money for worthy causes. Queer men often referred to bars as their town halls, their public meeting places, even their churches, so they served as more than merely a convenient place to find a sex partner.⁶² Until the late 1970s, after political activism by gays and lesbians escalated all across the United States, Oklahoma City had not yet experienced a Stonewall moment, a unifying event or incident that provoked a groundswell of political and social protest. That did not mean that social and political issues were absent from the minds of gay and bisexual residents here. In fact, it was in gay bars in Oklahoma City that those issues remained on the table and dominated discussions among patrons. In truth, the presence of gay bars in Oklahoma City enriched

⁶² “Gays Flexing Political Muscles, But Remain Divided on Strategy,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/4/1983, 9.

the gay and bisexual subculture and represented an adaptation to historical elements unique to Oklahoma City history.⁶³

If the Angles controversy did nothing else, it encouraged gay and bisexual men to make larger strides in integrating their subculture into the larger Oklahoma City cultural milieu. Most of the time, those efforts were successful, as the history of gay and lesbian participation in competitive sports – specifically softball, bowling, and rodeo – suggests. In 1983, the Tulsa branch of the Oklahomans for Human Rights founded the Sooner Softball League of Oklahoma, the first gay softball league in Oklahoma, as a means to provide gay athletes a structured, competitive outlet. Oklahoma City fielded a team in 1984, when the Oklahoma City Mainliners were one of the better clubs in the entire league. In 1985, Oklahoma City also added the Bunkhouse crew and the Metropolitan Community Church Saints, a coed team, to the league as well. This league was sanctioned by both the Association for Sports and Gay Athletics, and more importantly, the American Softball Association. These affiliations encouraged both the participants and the general public to take the league seriously, and the quality of play was rather high. Most of the League teams came from Stillwater, Oklahoma City, and Tulsa, and the bulk of the participants were gay, although sexual orientation was irrelevant for eligibility. Tulsa's most successful team, the Tulsa Outlaws, was sponsored by Tim Turner, owner of Tim's Playroom, a popular gay bar in Tulsa. The Outlaws won the Sooner Softball League championship in 1983, and they regularly chartered buses and traveled to Houston, Dallas, Atlanta, and Kansas City to play in tournaments. At the

⁶³ Gil Ray, interviews by author, 4/20/2005 and 8/9/2005; Ralph Prevette, interviews by author, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005; Arnold Lee, interviews by author, 2/11/2005 and 8/13/2005; Keith Smith, interviews by author, 7/20/2005; Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

annual Southwest Invitation tournament held in Tulsa, it was not unusual for teams from New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Atlanta to make the journey to play in the tournament. “It was mostly recreational, but one usually participates in sports to prove something.... whether it is to win or just to be a part of something bigger,” recalled Tim Turner. Particularly gratifying was the Outlaws’ ability to beat almost any team they played, including those with straight players. Despite the heady times in which they played, Turner could not remember any significant homophobic or hurtful remarks made by other players. Participants also used the softball tournaments as major sources of revenue for charity work. Tim’s Outlaws made a significant donation to the sponsor of the 1984 tournament championship, the Easter Seal Foundation of Oklahoma. The Sooner Softball League and its teams remained popular with the gay community, as the *Gayly Oklahoman* included a sports section in each issue primarily to keep people updated about gay softball. In addition, the Sooner Softball League received sponsorship from large companies, as the Budweiser/Golden distributorship in Tulsa sponsored the 1984 pre-season tournament.⁶⁴

Another sport that attracted a number of gay and lesbian residents in Oklahoma City was bowling. In 1985, the first gay bowling league in Oklahoma City formed, and they held tournaments of their own that drew large crowds. The Lambda Bowling Association held its first two league seasons at local Oklahoma City bowling alleys, and rented them out entirely for events. Apparently, the association was very popular, as the membership grew virtually every year since. Since 1989, the OK Classic bowling

⁶⁴ “Sooner Softball League Begins 1984 Season,” *Gayly Oklahoman*, (1984); “Form Rags to Riches?” *Gayly Oklahoman*, (1984); Sports Section, *Gayly Oklahoman*, (August 1985); Tim Turner, email interview, 11/3/2004.

tournament has been held in Oklahoma City, replete with large cash prizes. Recognized by the International Gay Bowling Organization, OK Classic was easily one of the largest tournaments held in the southwestern United States.⁶⁵

Easily the most important and enduring sport institutions that capitalized on the post-Angles climate of renewed vigor in Oklahoma City was the Oklahoma Gay Rodeo Association (OGRA), which first organized in 1985. The principal forces in getting the OGRA started were Les Krambeal and Walt Rupprecht, owners of a popular Oklahoma City western-themed gay bar called the Bunkhouse. Krambeal and Rupprecht regularly attended a gay rodeo in Reno, Nevada that raised money for muscular dystrophy, and both felt that a gay rodeo association would be very popular in Oklahoma, given the state's western heritage and untiring support of both the cattle and horse industries. In the summer of 1985, Krambeal and Rupprecht went to the International Gay Rodeo Association convention in Denver and formally applied for an Oklahoma state chapter. At that time, the IGRA was a fledgling organization with only four charter state members----California, Texas, Colorado, and Arizona. They were impressed with Oklahoma's application and approved it, and the OGRA quickly announced that it would host the Great Plains Rodeo the following summer.⁶⁶ In only a few short months, Oklahoma City proved to be a pioneer in bringing gay rodeo to Oklahomans and showcasing gay talent to the rest of the southwest.

⁶⁵ See www.okclassic.com for information on the annual tournament that brings hundreds of gay and bisexual bowlers to Oklahoma City. See also information about Lambda in the *Gayly Oklahoman*, vol 3, no. 9 (August 1985).

⁶⁶ "20th Annual Great Plains Rodeo!," *Gayly Oklahoman*, 23, no. 9 (5/1/2005); *Gayly Oklahoman*, June 1986, 8.

The OGRA events were extremely successful, professional enterprises that served as a powerful indicator of how far the gay community in Oklahoma City had come in gaining mainstream acceptance. Like other IGRA rodeos, events were open to all competitors regardless of race, sexuality, or gender. Women rode bulls, men competed in the pole bend and barrel racing competitions, and most contestants competed at an extraordinarily high level. The continued success of the OGRA event in Oklahoma City is evidenced by the fact that many straight professional rodeo riders compete in the Great Plains Rodeo, not only for the ever-increasing prize money but also for the valuable competitive experience it offers, and year after year the rodeo is welcomed at the Oklahoma State Fairgrounds, the site of all major fairs and livestock events held in Oklahoma.⁶⁷ Capitalizing on the public exposure of all things queer in the wake of the Angles controversy, the Oklahoma City gay male world fused form and function to provide one of the most popular and mainstream sources of entertainment featuring gay men and women to date. This was a powerful symbol for gay and bisexual men of just how far their subculture had traveled in only a few short years.

In addition to sports, gay and bisexual residents explored other community-building elements -- those that were for the gay community, by the gay community -- and the most important of these was the annual Pride Parade, first held in 1988. Gay Pride parades are, in general, controversial elements of community building. Some argue that the very act of gathering together in large numbers and parading through the streets of your neighborhood is a quintessential coming-out and queer-affirming experience. Others point out that the stereotypical behavior exhibited by some participants, whether

⁶⁷ Ibid.

marching or not, only makes every other day of the year that much more difficult. That was certainly the position held by those who feared exposing their homosexuality to friends and family. Other, more openly gay members of the Oklahoma City subculture felt much the same way, too:

They (activists) were all feeling very, "we have gone up on the mountain side and seen Jerusalem." Here's my age showing. It wasn't a bad idea, it just wasn't a good idea---no real purpose to be served. Parades do not raise consciousnesses. Having the "faggot" live next door and realizing he's a human being, that raises consciousnesses, people coming out helps, etc. With a parade you get "Dykes on Trikes" and "Fags in Drag," and it perpetuates every fucking stereotype that ever existed. But that's my age talking---the younger ones thought it was the bees knees. They think that it has accomplished some good, because some straight families show up with their kids.⁶⁸

Oklahoma City's first Gay Pride march occurred in 1988, and it went off with few problems. For several years, gay and bisexual residents marked the national Gay Pride Week celebrations by sponsoring a prominent speaker or having a block party along Northwest 39th Street. At first the community reaction was rather negative. Bill Rogers remembered renting a restaurant in Quail Creek to celebrate Pride Week in the late 1970s and having to carry a gun to the celebration because people made threats.⁶⁹ By 1988, a more tolerant atmosphere, in which gay and bisexual men could publicly proclaim and celebrate their sexuality, existed in Oklahoma City. That year, Andy Southam, Paul Thompson, Bill Rogers and others organized the first Gay Pride March under the theme "Rightfully Proud in '88." The parade started at Memorial Park, on Northwest 36th Street, and proceeded along 39th Street to the Oasis Community Center where the annual Pride block party occurred. Bill Rogers's pull with the National Gay and Lesbian Task

⁶⁸ Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005.

⁶⁹ Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

Force was in evidence, as the organization's executive director, Jeff Levi, flew to Oklahoma City and served as the event's keynote speaker. Local talent was on display, as several bars entered floats, prominent drag queens performed, and an honor guard from the OGRA marched. Making a highly emotional appearance were community members suffering from AIDS, who served as honorary grand marshals. On that beautiful June day, between 500 and 700 people showed up to show their support for the marchers. The Oklahoma City Parks and Recreation Department and the Police Department offered "complete cooperation" according to organizers. However, a few local residents voiced their displeasure with the parade. KATT radio DJ Rick Walker urged people to "mow down some queers" as the parade passed along 39th Street. The Ku Klux Klan planned a violent demonstration, hoping to scare marchers away. According to participants, when the throng of over five hundred supporters crested the hill on 39th Street just east of Pennsylvania, the KKK members ran to their vehicles and drove away. In fact, none of the participants were subjected to violence. The only protest came from a determined though peaceful group from Windsor Hills Baptist Church led by Jim Vineyard, its pastor. Otherwise, Oklahoma City's first gay pride parade went off as planned.⁷⁰

Given that Oklahoma is perceived as an intensely religious state, it should come as no surprise that religion played an important role in the lives of many queer Oklahoma City residents. Although denunciations from the pulpit made many feel uncomfortable or ashamed of their sexuality, a number of churches and ministers in Oklahoma City

⁷⁰ *Gayly Oklahoman*, April 1989, 9; "Proud Gays to Parade," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/16/1988, 4; "400 on Hand for Gay March," *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/20/1988; Harry Livesay, "First Oklahoma Gay Pride Parade A Success," *Gayly Oklahoman* (July 1988), 5; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

welcomed gays and lesbians with open arms. In fact, local churches provided gay and bisexual men with support and guidance through some of the darkest days in Oklahoma City.

One of the first gay-friendly churches in Oklahoma City was Christ the King Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which opened its doors in 1971. Located on Northwest 12th Street, MCC offered its worshipers commitment ceremonies, communion, and regular services at a time when these things were forbidden to homosexuals in mainline denominations. Worship leader Linda Laster believed her church filled a huge void in the hearts of gays and lesbians. “Just because someone is homosexual doesn’t mean that they don’t have God in their lives. Gays have been told for so long that they’re unacceptable that they’ve begun to buy into it.”⁷¹

The Mayflower United Congregational Church of Christ was another religious institution that accepted homosexuals. Robin Meyers, a life-long Oklahoma City resident and Biblical scholar, has been pastor at Mayflower since 1985. The Mayflower was affiliated with the United Church of Christ, a denomination known to be on the cutting edge of religious change – they had both the first female minister and first black minister ever ordained in a Protestant denomination. The Mayflower was also self-governing, a fact that made adapting church doctrine to local issues easier, and the church commits almost fifty percent of its operating budget to charity work. In 1998, the Mayflower congregation adopted an inclusivity statement that made the church one of the most welcoming of gays and lesbians in Oklahoma. The vote was unanimous. As a result of that inclusivity, many gay and lesbian Oklahoma City residents call the

⁷¹ “Some Seek God’s Love,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/3/1983, 21.

Mayflower their spiritual home. Many committed gay couples participate at services, sing in the choir, and bring their unique talents to bear on the congregation. Meyers cherishes their involvement, and notes that he has a nice mix of gay, straight, bisexual, and transgendered worshipers.⁷²

The Church of the Open Arms was another Oklahoma City church that embraced the gay and lesbian community, so much so that it became almost completely identified as a gay church. Kathy McCallie was a Methodist minister in the 1990s when she became disenchanted with her church leadership and its stand on homosexuality. Robin Meyers encouraged her to join the United Church of Christ, which she did, and started the Church of Open Arms. Located at 3131 North Pennsylvania, the Church of the Open Arms quickly became a gay institution, something that both helps and hinders it. By having such an open attitude regarding homosexuality, it naturally brought large numbers of gay and lesbian residents into its flock. In the long run, however, this cultural balkanization encourages separatism, according to Robin Meyers, as mainline denominations feel no need to accept gays and lesbians, and since queer residents have their own churches, homosexuals feel no need to seek membership in the mainline churches.⁷³

By the dawn of the 1990s, Oklahoma City's gay and bisexual male subculture had firmly established its right to exist and publicly celebrated a sense of diversity and community. Annual Pride Week festivities, where gay Oklahoma City residents unabashedly proclaimed their sexuality, punctuated the virtual monopoly on

⁷² Robin Meyers, telephone interview by author, 11/5/2004.

⁷³ Ibid.

entertainment and business locations that gays and lesbians enjoyed along 39th Street between Pennsylvania and May Avenue. The judicial system in Oklahoma had been very good to gay causes by and large, largely due to the bold way in which prominent and plebian men fought such challenges as the Helm Bill and the Angles controversy. Rank and file community members -- those who found new and more emboldened ways to express their sexuality -- also played a huge role in this transformation. Downtown Oklahoma City ceased to offer the plethora of sexual and social situations that had been available since the 1940s largely because the physical space changed via urban renewal, and authorities took a much more strident interest in policing queer social and sexual habits. In response to these challenges, gay and bisexual men moved elsewhere, carving out spaces for communal expression, both social and sexual, that perplexed authorities and served as a valuable example of determination for those still too reticent to be out. Oklahoma City did not have a Stonewall Rebellion as such, but it did have several Stonewall moments that built incrementally on the successes of activists since the 1970s. The most important of these was the Angles incident. Here a group of queer residents, each for their own reasons, decided that a line had been drawn. No longer would indiscriminant and petty harassment -- to say nothing of overt violence -- be taken in stride. The Angles incident established a central zone of queer space in Oklahoma City, a place with bars and a community center free from an overt police presence. Since those heady days in the early 1980s, the soul of the Oklahoma City gay male subculture has resided there.

Chapter IX

AIDS in Oklahoma City

In late 1980, a number of young gay men, presumably in good health, started coming down with two rare ailments – a devastating form of pneumonia, and an extremely rare skin cancer, Kaposi's sarcoma, usually found in older people of Mediterranean descent. The cases were very unusual, fatal, and were geographically scattered to the farthest reaches of the United States, from New York City to Los Angeles and San Francisco. Doctors quickly realized that some kind of new immuno-deficiency disease was at work, and it seemed to target gay and bisexual men at first. Over the next three years, the caseloads in these metropolitan areas seemed to skyrocket, and people died at an alarming rate. After much research the Centers for Disease Control and other dedicated scientists finally let the world know that Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS, was the culprit. Without a cure, and without a reliable test, scientists feared that the disease would spread like wildfire through gay and bisexual communities first, but that it was only a matter of time before all Americans -- regardless of their sexual preference -- would face the specter of AIDS. Their fears were well founded, and the level of ignorance, homophobia, and general fear made AIDS a political firestorm. Politicians, doctors, and religious figures all offered a variety of ways to combat the disease -- strengthening and enforcing sodomy laws, starting gay

concentration camps, testing immigrants for the virus -- all of which at some level targeted gay men and called into question just how far the gay liberation movement had traveled. Despite the rapid rise of heterosexual AIDS cases by 1986, gay and bisexual men, through their supposedly hedonistic lifestyle, received blame for the disease. Their world, and their lives, would never be the same.¹

AIDS blazed through the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male community much like it did in other, larger cities throughout the United States, although not as early, and it engendered the same fears, prejudice, and homophobia. Much like on the national level, however, the health crisis led to unparalleled activism by the community at large. Building upon the recent successes of the Oklahomans for Human Rights and the Angles lawsuit against Oklahoma City, AIDS caused people from all walks of life – and classes – to unite in an effort to support those stricken with the disease. Gay and bisexual men became more circumspect in their sexual behavior. Socialization patterns changed, promiscuity declined, and gay and bisexual men made taking care of AIDS *their* problem. They realized rather quickly that they would not receive much help from anybody else.

Gay and bisexual male residents in Oklahoma City followed the AIDS crisis in larger metropolitan areas since 1981 when some of the first cases of a mysterious cancer affecting gay men were reported in New York and California. Despite some concerns, many in the gay community felt safe in Oklahoma City, in part because gay and bisexual men enjoyed a high degree of freedom in the 1970s and 1980s. A number of bars and

¹ John D’Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 354-360.

well-known public gathering places were available for a sexual hookup, and unless their behavior was too outrageous, authorities usually left them alone. Business at the “RAC” was booming, and it was not unheard of for young gay and bisexual men to have anonymous sex, with multiple partners, on a daily basis. Even after AIDS first gained national attention, queer Oklahoma City residents paid very little attention to it, reasoning that this was a “San Francisco disease.”² Community leader Bill Rogers remembers his own early attempts to educate Oklahomans about AIDS and how even gay members of the medical community could be rather obtuse about the issue:

I first heard about AIDS when I was on the board of directors of the National Gay Task Force and we met in New York. In 1981 or 1982 I went to a board meeting there and Bruce (Voeller) and all of the others were talking about it. Bruce was a biochemist or something, a very scientific type. I came home and had Roger McFarland as a guest, who founded Gay Men’s Health Crisis in New York, and I hosted a dinner party with some local gay doctors so that Roger could alert them to what was coming and what to do about it. They all pooh-poohed it, saying ‘that’s not coming here, not to Oklahoma.’³

Soon, that optimism gave way to the harsh reality that AIDS does not respect any boundary, be it racial, sexual, or geographic. The Oklahoma State Health Department (OSHD) acknowledged that AIDS struck in Oklahoma in April 1983, when the first positive case was reported. By June, OSHD documented four cases of the disease in Oklahoma, and of those, one patient already had died. All of those infected were from either Oklahoma City or Tulsa, and perhaps in an effort to allay fears of Oklahoma residents, OSHD stated that two of the men became infected in cities outside of

² Victor Gorin, telephone conversation with author, 8/11/2005.

³ Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

Oklahoma. By the end of 1983, at least three people died from AIDS, and the health department logged seven new diagnoses.⁴

The reaction from the straight community was somewhat predictable, and it was not unlike the reactions expressed all over the United States. Before people knew that AIDS was a blood-borne illness, one that could strike anybody, the disease became almost universally identified with gay and bisexual men. As fear gripped Oklahomans, regular articles appeared in the *Daily Oklahoman* that detailed the latest news and scope of spread of AIDS.⁵ Editorials appeared in the *Daily Oklahoman* from the Washington news bureau that blamed gay men for the spread of the disease. “The sexual revolution has begun to devour its children.” The proof, according to the editorial, included the “fact” that the mortality rate for AIDS was highest among gay activists. No statistical information was included to back up these claims.⁶ Local editorials discussed the efficacy of increased federal funds for studying the disease, especially since many other “pressing public health priorities” -- diseases usually found in heterosexual populations, like herpes – were on the rise. Besides, the “obvious” need for gay men to curtail their sexual license and be more responsible would eradicate the disease anyway:

⁴ “First State Aids Death Is Reported,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/13/1983, 1; “Three New Cases of AIDS Reported to Oklahoma Department of Health,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 11/4/1983, 9.

⁵ “Male Homosexuals Discouraged From Donating Blood,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/3/1983, 1, 27; “Other Troubles Tend to Pale at the Threat of AIDS,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/2/1983, 34; “AIDS Victims Wasting Away; No Medical Help in Sight,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/13/1984, 1.

⁶ “Awful AIDS IS Nature’s Retribution,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/26/1983, 10.

Homosexuals confronted with the reality of acquired immune deficiency syndrome have every reason to be scared. The heterosexual counterpart – herpes – is an annoying malady, but certainly not life-threatening...Homosexual men caught up in the AIDS crisis do need compassion, understanding and the best medical attention. But it does seem reasonable that, at the same time, they must take a closer look at their own sexual lifestyles. They simply must be less promiscuous and show considerably more restraint and self-control. There are far more pressing health priorities deserving of federal attention than AIDS, among them a renewed incidence of curable venereal disease and an alarming recurrence of several preventable childhood diseases.⁷

Other stories highlighted the fear that many Oklahomans felt regarding AIDS – and heightened homophobia as well -- and their appearance on the front page of Oklahoma's largest newspaper brought residents the specter of the disease almost daily. Shortly after the news broke that AIDS entered Oklahoma, a story appeared in the *Daily Oklahoman* that detailed how city officials in Tulsa drained and disinfected a city pool at the request of concerned citizens after OHR, an organization by then perceived to be almost exclusively a homosexual lobby, had held a private party there. As early as January of 1983, before even the first case of AIDS was confirmed in Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Blood Institute publicly asked gay men to stop donating blood, under any circumstances. OBI director Ron Gilcher planned to speak with local gay groups to encourage their participation in the ban, something that proved difficult to sell since gay Oklahoma City residents were some of the most loyal blood donors. Later, when the Oklahoma Blood Institute destroyed over 120 pints of blood after twenty-one of them tested positive for AIDS antibodies, no mention was made of the fact that a new test existed which could help in detection, which would have prevented tainted blood from

⁷ "Remedy for AIDS Available," *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/8/1983, 4.

being given to another patient. Although the intent of the story was likely to show readers that OBI worked diligently to protect Oklahoma's blood supply, it also played to fears that AIDS-tainted blood streamed through Oklahoma's blood supply.⁸ Other articles focused on the misery and despondency that gay men with AIDS felt, how difficult it was to receive treatment and find housing, and the community ostracism that came with admitting one had AIDS.⁹

Virtually anything found in print regarding AIDS in Oklahoma identified the disease exclusively with homosexuals. Although understandable during the early 1980s when facts about the disease and its transmission were lacking, this had a chilling effect on gay and bisexual men in Oklahoma City. Some Oklahoma City residents noticed a profound shift in attitudes regarding how other residents treated them. At first, straight people were worried and wanted to know how the disease spread. After news stories and the government labeled it a "gay thing" in many people's minds, their focus shifted: "their attitude quickly became like 'fuck you, queer.'"¹⁰ The gay and bisexual community reacted to AIDS in a variety of ways. Those who were overly promiscuous continued to be so, racking up conquest totals and engaging in decidedly high-risk

⁸ "Tulsa Pool Drained Because of AIDS Fears," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/20/1983, 1; "120 Pints of Blood Destroyed After AIDS Test," *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/7/1985, 1.

⁹ "You Want the News? I'm Dying and That's the News," *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/27/1985, 15.

¹⁰ "Male Homosexuals Discouraged From Donating Blood Because of Risks," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/3/1983, 1, 27; "Gay Community Will Cooperate, Activist Thinks," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/3/1983, 2; Victor Gorin, telephone conversation, 10/13/2005; Interviews with Bill Rogers, Ralph Prevette, Keith Smith, Joe, Gil Ray, Arnold Lee, and Jim McMurray; Quote taken from interview with Manny, 7/14/2005, Oklahoma City.

behaviors, reasoning that they were already infected or likely to become infected very soon. Others chose celibacy, with varying degrees of success, and retreated back deep into the closet to avoid painful questions from friends and coworkers fearful of AIDS. The majority of gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents altered their sexual behavior in order to reduce their chances of becoming infected. One prominent Oklahoma City lawyer told the *Daily Oklahoman* that “I’ve been overly promiscuous all my adult life, but the emergence of AIDS has curtailed my activity tremendously. The plague killed fewer people than AIDS is going to kill.”¹¹ Particularly hard-hit was the drag queen set, those courageous and outrageous members of the community who served both as sources of emulation and revulsion for gay and bisexual residents. Long-time Oklahoma City impersonator Terressa Terrell remembers that she, unlike some of the queens, chose to be more circumspect when the crisis hit. “That is probably why I am alive and 99.9% of all true RoadHouse girls are dead of AIDS. I am very alone without my girlfriends.”¹² The sheer number of anonymous sexual encounters declined, and places that promoted such practices – like the Renaissance Athletic Club – went out of business. The publicity surrounding high-profile deaths like Rock Hudson encouraged many at-risk people to get tested. Others sought social and psychological help in an effort to alter their lifestyles or

¹¹ “Other Troubles Tend to Pale at the Threat of AIDS,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/2/1983, 34; “Ignorance, Apathy Boosting Spread of AIDS in Oklahoma,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/18/1989, 8.

¹² Terressa Terrell, email interview by author, 4/16/2005. Arnold Lee and Terressa both spoke of the toll AIDS took on RoadHouse regulars.

come to terms with their sexuality, thereby raising their self-esteem and making them less susceptible to risk-laden behaviors.¹³

Because AIDS was viewed almost unilaterally as a gay plague, combating the disease in Oklahoma City was a fight waged primarily by the gay community, a community that traditionally failed to heed the call on macro issues affecting LGBT Americans. As previous chapters indicated, it took many years before the gay and bisexual world in Oklahoma City fought discrimination in a coordinated manner, and it remained unlikely to rise up and respond unless challenged specifically by such things as homophobic police officers or county attorneys. Many gay and bisexual men seemed content to socialize privately at home or in the popular gay bars, of which there were an impressive number for a town the size of Oklahoma City. AIDS remained a terrifying unknown in the early 1980s; many, from activists to medical professionals to rank-and-file citizens, did not know how to react or mobilize what limited resources were available. There was no reason, given its history, to assume that the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male world would respond with a great deal of organization.

At first this was absolutely the case, as the story of one Oklahoma AIDS victim illustrates. Local gay political activist and lobbyist Keith Smith wrote a poignant, heart-wrenching story about the ninth victim of AIDS in Oklahoma, known simply as “#9.” A native Oklahoman, #9 moved to West Hollywood when he was only seventeen. He was not a typical young gay man in West Hollywood in the late 1970s, before AIDS: he was

¹³ The Renaissance Athletic Club closed for good in 1986; “AIDS Victims Wasting Away; No Medical Help in Sight,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/13/1985, 1; “AIDS Strikes, Kills – All Vulnerable,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/27/1985, 1; Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005; Victor Gorin, telephone conversation with author, 8/11/2005; Joseph Kirk, interview by author, 1/12/2005.

monogamous and in a long-term, committed relationship. In the early 1980s, his lover committed suicide, possibly after learning that he had contracted AIDS, and #9 continued to live and work in California until he, too, discovered he had AIDS. Soon, he was unable to find a place to live, his friends turned their backs on him, and he returned to Oklahoma and lived with his judgmental parents. A local non-emergency transport service refused to shuttle #9 back and forth to the hospital until medical officials explained exactly how AIDS was transmitted. Given the pervasive fear of the unknown regarding AIDS, it was unfortunate but not surprising that technicians wore hazardous material suits and used a telephone to turn pages on #9's chart to avoid contact with him, and they completely sterilized their van after each trip. After a stint in Oklahoma Memorial Hospital, #9's parents were unable and unwilling to care for him any longer. Nursing homes refused to take him in. Out of fifty nursing facilities that health officials contacted, only one agreed to care for him, and the home's administrator suffered mightily for that decision when the parent company's quality control advisor forced them to implement a number of outlandish and ridiculous safety precautions. #9 died in late 1983, the ninth victim of AIDS in Oklahoma. Keith Smith chastised his fellow Oklahoma City gay and bisexual residents, most of whom ignored the plight of people like #9. "I know you will be shocked by the insensitivity of referring to a human being as a number but let's be consistent, we treated him with insensitivity when he was still alive so why fall all over ourselves now? The only thing is (to) make sure it never happens again."¹⁴

¹⁴ "Meet #9," *Gayly Oklahoman* (January 1984).

Many gay and bisexual men who read Keith Smith's article, whether they agreed with his politics or not, were shocked at how they treated one of their own, and the seed for change had been planted.¹⁵ In fact, AIDS ignited the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual world to push for change, expand minds, and care for the sick. As Bill Rogers related, "I think the AIDS crisis helped the political movement (here) more than it hurt. People were forced out of the closet by the lesions on their face. They started having meetings, support meetings, and you found out people were gay that you didn't know were gay. I think we were energized by the AIDS crisis."¹⁶ One of the first organizations to step up and meet the AIDS crisis head on was the Oasis Community Center. Through its publication, *Our Time*, and its evolutionary endpoint the *Gayly Oklahoman*, the Center made AIDS education and resource allocation high priorities. Many of the volunteers who started and nourished the Center and the *Gayly* through those very difficult first years also volunteered at the Oklahoma Blood Institute, manning the phones at its hotline established shortly after officials reported the first AIDS death in Oklahoma City.¹⁷

The AIDS Support Program also sprang from the Center. Founded in 1985, the Support Group was a loosely organized cadre of volunteers who raised money to help defray health care costs and provide emotional and psychological counseling for those

¹⁵ Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005. Smith noted that "a lot" of gay and bisexual people he met at fund-raisers, political rallies, and support meetings mentioned his article and how it motivated them to get involved with AIDS amelioration.

¹⁶ Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

¹⁷ "AIDS Clinics, Hotline Open To Help Gay Community," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/6/1983, 8.

stricken with AIDS. It was the first group that dedicated itself to ameliorating the effects of AIDS, and it was successful despite obstacles imposed upon it by the straight community. Bill Rogers remembers that “The Oklahoma AIDS Support Group leased offices in a building near Grand and NW 63rd and there was a restaurant next to it. Although they had a long-term lease, the restaurant owner insisted they vacate the premises, and they did. He was scared that they would run his customers off.”¹⁸

The Support Group forged a productive and powerful cooperative relationship with Oklahoma City gay bar owners, something that was truly groundbreaking. Historically, gay bar owners in Oklahoma City did not cultivate or appreciate political agitation from patrons. In their view, just being able to socialize at an openly gay bar was a major advance from the days when bars were nonexistent or pretended to be straight.¹⁹ With an enemy like AIDS, that kind of detachment could no longer be sustained. Leading the way were Don Hill and Scott Wilson, the owners of Angles and the Park, and living legend Gil Ray, former owner of Saddle Tramps and proprietor of the Hi-Lo. Angles regularly held AIDS fundraisers, and they raised a lot of money just from the bar alone. Hill and Wilson donated most of the proceeds raised to the Winds House, Oklahoma City’s first and only shelter for AIDS patients. They both also helped sponsor, in conjunction with local car dealer Jackie Cooper, the Red Tie Night party, an evening of glamorous socialization between wealthy Oklahoma City residents and prominent members of the gay community that usually ended with large checks being

¹⁸ “OKC AIDS Support Group Formed,” *Gayly Oklahoman* (September 1985), 3; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

¹⁹ Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; Lance, interview by author, 1/11/2005; Arnold Lee, interview by author, 2/11/2005.

written to local AIDS charities. Angles, Sisters, Tramps, and other bars along Glitter Alley unite annually to throw the 39th Street Block Party for the gay community, and all money raised goes to Winds. The Hi-Lo held their annual Turn-About Show, usually in September, and all proceeds go to the Oklahoma City AidsWalk, an annual event that started in 1992 in memory of local activist Ken Taylor.²⁰

Other community groups used their events as a springboard for fundraising and education about AIDS as well. The Oklahoma Gay Rodeo raised over \$10,000 at their annual event in Oklahoma City in 1986, a phenomenal amount given that this organization was still in its infancy.²¹ The money raised by these annual events helped AIDS sufferers and HIV-positive Oklahoma City residents to receive a wide range of assistance: food, health care, medicine, and housing. In fact, much of the money raised went to alleviate the most pressing need for those already diagnosed with AIDS, health care, as well as prevention.

It was in the arena of education and prevention that a number of sympathetic Oklahomans – many of whom were straight – joined the fight. Former schoolteacher Vickie White, a freshman Democratic representative from Norman, proposed HB 1476 on the floor of the House on February 25th, 1987, in her zest to educate young Oklahomans about the dangers of AIDS. It was a simple amendment that placed AIDS education on the list of required subjects taught in Oklahoma schools. The bill, by design, was somewhat flexible in that it left curriculum development to the State

²⁰ “Angles Celebrates Twenty Years,” *Gayly Oklahoman*, 8/15/2002, 7; Gil Ray, interview by author, 4/20/2005; “Walk to Benefit AIDS Programs,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/30/1992, 131.

²¹ “Rodeo to Help AIDS Victims,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/19/1986, 39.

Department of Education and implementation to local school boards. Jeff Hamilton, also a freshman Democratic representative from Midwest City, stumped with White to see that the bill passed. Hamilton's son convinced him that not addressing the issue, given the grave threat that AIDS posed in Oklahoma, would be "irresponsible." With its passage later that summer, Oklahoma became the first state in the nation to require such education for students.²²

HB 1476 seemed broad enough to appease conservatives who prized home rule, and specific enough to appease those seeking to educate Oklahoma students about all aspects of AIDS, so White and Hamilton hoped the bill would sail through the capitol. Their initial optimism quickly gave way to the reality, and enormity, of what passing a bill like that would require. Not only did they have to craft the bill, work tirelessly to drum up support, but they had to educate many lawmakers about AIDS, as in many cases they were under-informed about essential facts associated with the disease. The debate over HB 1476 was intense. White, Hamilton, and other supporters introduced statistics issued by the OSHD that showed AIDS treatment would cost Oklahoma taxpayers over \$50 million annually by 1991, and that forty percent of those with AIDS were indigent. Moreover, teenagers would be the next highest high-risk group soon, so it made sense to educate them now, and heterosexuals would soon see a twenty-fold increase in HIV transmission statistics if trends did not subside through education. Republicans in both houses argued that the bill amounted to mandatory sex education, something they believed was a parental responsibility, and it would essentially teach and encourage

²² House Panel Votes to Require Education on AIDS," *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/12/1987, 1; "AIDS Bill Passes after 'Safe Sex' Talk," *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/18/1987, 1.

adolescents to engage in sex. Worse yet, the bill would require discussion of homosexuality and homosexual practices in public schools, something they adamantly opposed, and might be viewed as condoning an immoral lifestyle. “My simple statement is that AIDS education teaches kids how to have sex and not not to have sex,” stated Representative Jim Reese, a Republican from Deer Creek. Anti-abortion activist Ruth McFarlane testified that AIDS education would not stop the spread of AIDS, just as sex education in Oklahoma had not prevented STD spread or unplanned pregnancies. “We must teach our children that chastity is to be desired.” In an obvious attempt to sink the bill, at one point during the debate Representative Mike Morris, a Republican from Ripley, introduced sections from a pamphlet entitled “Safe Sex Guidelines” he received from an anti-abortion group that detailed explicit sexual practices, and he tried to goad Vickie White into reading passages aloud. The pamphlet, created by a San Francisco group, was obviously intended for adults, and would never be presented to students in Oklahoma schools in such a frank and demeaning way, according to White. House leaders sanctioned Morris and suggested that he apologize for his profane display. After much debate and arm-twisting, the measure passed the House 55-42, and it went to the senate one week later.²³

When HB 1476 came to the senate, the freshman representatives received help from two unlikely sources — long-time state senator Gene Stipe and Republican Governor Henry Bellmon. Stipe believed it was cost effective to prevent the disease rather than treat it, and Governor Bellmon stated rather emphatically that he supported AIDS education and prevention measures. HB 1467 quickly went to a joint committee,

²³ Ibid.

where Stipe brokered a compromise. The compromise version of HB 1467 emphasized abstinence over all else. It stated that students must be told that AIDS is most easily contracted through intravenous drug use, promiscuous sexual activity, and contact with contaminated blood. In addition, the bill required that the curriculum hammer home the idea that sexual activity of any kind – even with condoms – with somebody that is HIV-positive puts people into a high-risk category for contracting HIV. Students would receive the educational materials once between the seventh and ninth grades, and once between the tenth and twelfth grades, and parents had the right to examine course materials and to prevent their children from participating in the program if they wished. Local school districts were given a great deal of leeway in implementing the curriculum.²⁴

White's struggle left her battered but optimistic that she had achieved some positive headway in the fight against AIDS. A colleague noted that "She got six years experience with that one bill," and White acknowledged that her naiveté probably helped. Despite the changes to her bill, White was glad that it passed, and noted that education was paramount until the discovery of a vaccine for AIDS. Governor Henry Bellmon signed the bill, on April 25, 1987, and all schools in Oklahoma began to teach an AIDS curriculum the following school year.²⁵ Like most controversial bills, however, the

²⁴ "Senate Panel OKs AIDS Education Bill," *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/7/1987, 1; "AIDS Education Required in Schools," *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/25/1987, 12

²⁵ "AIDS Measure Proponent Feels Scars of Battle," *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/26/1987, 1, 2. The author remembers being a senior in an Oklahoma high school in 1988 and receiving the first AIDS/HIV informational workshop offered at that school as a result of HB 1467. Taught by an assistant football coach, in a sex-segregated room, the curriculum featured

AIDS education act did not translate into immediate action, nor was it universally applied. The state legislature failed to fund the program annually, and the Oklahoma Department of Education rarely monitored the program with any diligence. As a result, AIDS education still, in 2005, is “fragmented, lacking, and unmonitored” according to one activist.²⁶

Although education was a huge priority, the gay community branched out into other, more immediate needs in regard to AIDS support. The Winds House was the brainchild of the AIDS Support Program, who oversaw operations and secured funding for the shelter. It started in 1986 as a place where those afflicted with AIDS might receive compassionate care, companionship, and support through various medical crises, as well as those final, difficult days. Located in the heart of the historic Gatewood district near downtown Oklahoma City, the two-story, 3000 square-foot Winds House served as many as eight residents at a time. Live-ins paid approximately \$350 a month to offset utility costs, but most residents were on disability and could not afford the entire amount. ASP and the LGBT community sponsored fundraisers to offset costs and allow people to stay at Winds who could not afford it. In addition to companionship, transportation, and help with basic living needs, the Winds offered large Sunday meals for residents and their families, as well as weekly support meetings. The need was crucial, as Oklahoma City, to say nothing of Oklahoma, had neither intermediate care for those hoping to return to their homes nor intensive support for end-stage AIDS patients.

important, honest assessments of risk-laden behaviors, transmission methods, and current treatment options.

²⁶ Kay Holladay, email interview by author, 10/31/2005.

It was close to the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, the flagship location in AIDS treatment at that juncture. Ken Miller, who ran the Winds for ASP, noted “people who come to homes like ours often have no place else to go. Family members often kick them out---because telling your family you have AIDS is probably also telling your family for the first time that you’re homosexual.” Miller and his volunteer staff stressed that although most residents succumbed at Winds in the beginning, “This is not a death house. The environment is very much a place to live.”²⁷

While Winds House met the immediate needs of those afflicted with AIDS in Oklahoma City, another organization, R.A.I.N. -- Regional AIDS Interfaith Network -- approached AIDS care in a more all-encompassing way. R.A.I.N. started in 1990, and its mission was to alleviate discrimination and promote compassion for those with AIDS in faith communities all over Oklahoma. It targeted faith-based organizations, private schools and colleges, and professional groups for education about AIDS. It was a volunteer-based group, staffed by members of the gay and lesbian community, and was administered statewide, something that was unheard of in AIDS amelioration attempts before 1990. R.A.I.N. was unusual in that it relied completely on private funding, something that was both terrifying and exhilarating to organizers – they were not at the mercy of federal or state requirements regarding how they could spend the money, but if they did not raise it, programs went unfunded. Over time, R.A.I.N. offered a remarkable range of services, considering how it was funded. Case management services, which made prescription drugs and a wide range of medical facilities available, complemented

²⁷ “AIDS Sufferer Discovers Haven at City Shelter,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/9/1987, 1.

the other programs that provided housing assistance, nutritional assessments, and HIV testing and education. Funding issues remained acute, and R.A.I.N. almost folded in 2002 due to a dearth of donations. Emergency private and corporate sponsorship kept R.A.I.N. going, however, and the programs continue to the present day.²⁸

One compelling reason that AIDS received little financial assistance from state sources in Oklahoma was simply that it took longer for enough cases to be diagnosed in Oklahoma to warrant a response in the minds of some people. Statistics from the OSDH show that the number of AIDS and HIV diagnoses did not crest in Oklahoma until the early 1990s. In fact, 1991-1997 represented the peak years of total diagnoses in Oklahoma – and deaths from HIV/AIDS did not crest until 1993-1995 -- so it is no coincidence that many of the most fully funded programs started after 1990. Nationally, over 300,000 people died of AIDS between 1981 and 1998. In Oklahoma, as late as September 30, 2005, only 7034 cases of HIV and AIDS have been diagnosed in the entire state, with some 2742 deaths, a significant number to be sure, but not the kind of representation that would encourage a conservative Oklahoma legislature to fund AIDS and HIV-related programs with any regularity.²⁹

²⁸ Michael Harmon, email interview by author, 11/3/2005; Jean Ann Van Krevelen, email interview by author, 10/31/2005. In January of 2005, R.A.I.N. merged with CarePoint to offer the widest range of services for those suffering from HIV/AIDS to date.

²⁹ *Oklahoma Statewide Epidemiologic Profile for HIV Prevention Community Planning*, Oklahoma State Department of Health (Oklahoma City, 2005), 8, 16, 25, 30; Same source, supporting documents, Table 1: Oklahoma Reported HIV and AIDS Summary Statistics, Cumulative as of 9/30/2005; The national statistics are taken from Stephen M. Engel, *The Unfinished Revolution: Social Movement Theory and the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 47.

Into that void stepped the federal government, which provided sorely needed funds that the medical community in Oklahoma City used to treat AIDS and educate health care providers and the general public. One of the most substantial federal programs ever developed to deal with AIDS was the Ryan White CARE (Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency) Act, which passed in 1990. Named after the gentle young hemophiliac who captured America's heart during his struggle with AIDS, this legislation poured hundreds of millions of dollars into organizations that treated all aspects of HIV and AIDS. In fact, funding for RWCA was the largest single budgetary outlay from the Health Resources and Services Administration of the federal government. The RWCA was controversial, however. Many saw it as a well-deserved reward for activists who had spent years agitating for homosexual rights and on behalf of AIDS, and it provided sustained funding for many organizations all over the United States. Others lamented the federal restrictions that came with RWCA funds, as well as the separatism it promoted. For years, activists worked to make AIDS and its treatment part of the larger mainstream medical establishment. RWCA and the continual fight to keep it funded did just the opposite – keeping AIDS as a cottage industry, marked by being the only disease-specific program that the federal government funded. Also, RWCA represented only 18% of what the federal government spent on AIDS research and treatment in total by 1998, with the majority of services being funded by Medicaid and Medicare. As a result, RWCA supporters constantly feared losing their funding in political dramas following congressional elections.³⁰

³⁰ John-Manuel Andriote, "The Ryan White Care Act: An Impressive, Dubious Accomplishment," in *Creating Change: Sexuality, Public Policy, and Civil Rights*, ed.

RWCA funds proved to be a godsend for Oklahomans, however, by spawning new agencies and fully funding those most capable of offering amelioration. OK-CARE, an acronym for Oklahoma Center for AIDS Resources and Education, started in 1990 after the RWCA funds were released. That grant made funds available to the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, under the College of Medicine, where Jennifer Nelson oversaw a program designed to educate physicians, dentists, and other health care providers about the nuances of AIDS and HIV transmission, and the psychological and social implications of the disease. “In the early days of HIV disease in Oklahoma, there were many health professionals who would refuse health care and treatment to persons infected with the virus that causes AIDS. Ignorance was abundant about the disease and its transmission,” related Kay Holladay, an AIDS advocate and long-time volunteer in the community who currently directs the Surveillance and Care Directory division of the HIV/STD service at the Oklahoma State Department of Health. Michael Harmon, chief of the HIV/STD service, noted that

Homophobia in Oklahoma City did increase because of the AIDS epidemic. There were physicians, dentists, nurses and other clinicians who refused to treat individuals with AIDS because of fear. Some AIDS patients who were hospitalized reported that some nurses would cross to the other side of the hall as they passed their rooms, and that when entering their room, would gown up, cover their hands with latex gloves and put masks on.³¹

John D’Emilio (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000): 407-410. Andriote touches on the controversial aspects of the RWCA, showing that it undermines many of the larger goals that gay rights activists pursue, but it provides necessary funding for all manner of AIDS programs all over the United States.

³¹ Michael Harmon, email interview by author, 11/3/2005.

OK-CARE was the first source available to health care providers in Oklahoma, but it was woefully under-staffed and under-funded. In fact, for some time OK-CARE consisted of exactly one educator, one administrator, and one secretary to serve the entire state of Oklahoma, something that limited its effectiveness.³²

While OK-CARE focused on advocacy and educating the medical community, CarePoint was one of the first organizations started to alleviate the misery of those directly affected by HIV and AIDS. Started in 1993 by Michael Harmon, CarePoint was also a nonprofit organization that offered services to Oklahomans living with HIV and AIDS in fifty-four of Oklahoma's seventy-seven counties. CarePoint's first president was Kay Holladay, one of the founders of OK-CARE who had some experience dealing with AIDS advocacy issues in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, private sources of funding were lacking, and the most common source of local nonprofit funds -- the United Way -- refused to help CarePoint. Undaunted, Harmon took advantage of a grant from RWCA to fund CarePoint, whose mission was to provide health care and support for those afflicted with AIDS, as well as education and prevention for the community at large. CarePoint placed special emphasis on maintaining the independence of those suffering with AIDS. The need for CarePoint was acute, and the federal government apparently realized this. The program skyrocketed during its first three years in operation---from an annual budget of \$90,000 and one full-time employee to a \$1.2 million annual budget and twenty full-time employees. Harmon and his staff were thrilled with the expansion, but it brought its own share of headaches. "The biggest obstacle in the beginning was the rapid growth of government funding which created new programs and added additional

³² Kay Holladay, email interview by author, 10/31/2005.

staff at a rate that was difficult to manage. Funds emerged for new program areas, such as employment assistance and case management. This required hiring specific skill sets and resulted in immediate training and space needs.” CarePoint adapted quickly, however, and eventually received funding from a variety of state resources, such as the Oklahoma State Department of Rehabilitation Services, the Oklahoma Housing and Finance Agency, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and even the City of Oklahoma City. CarePoint was a valuable and successful program, if one uses its longevity and the wide range of services it offered as criteria. It remained in force until January of 2005 when it merged with R.A.I.N. to become RAINOK, Regional AIDS Intercommunity Network of Oklahoma, a move that Harmon believed would make raising money for services much easier.³³

While educating the general public and working to end discrimination were laudable goals, long-term home health care and hospice services were an urgent need for many suffering from AIDS in Oklahoma City, and yet it took some time before any were available on a regular basis. Home Care Options, then the second largest home care operation in Oklahoma, opened in 1992, almost nine years after the OSDH recorded an AIDS case in Oklahoma. With forty-five employees, HCO brought skilled nursing and a wide range of physical and occupational therapies to the doorsteps of those afflicted with any number of conditions, twenty-four-hours a day. It was the dearth of such services available for HIV patients that persuaded two of its founders, Deborah Graumann and Grant Bell, to bring that care to AIDS patients. Although HCO was not devoted solely

³³ Michael Harmon, email interview by author, 11/3/2005.

to HIV and AIDS care, they were the only home health provider willing to care for those afflicted with the disease in 1992. In fact, one HIV-positive client received weekly breathing treatments from HCO, and that patient lived in Hugo, Oklahoma, a three-hour drive from Oklahoma City. An HCO technician made that trip every week, for one billable treatment hour, and passed at least three other home health facilities and a hospital along the way that could administer the medicine to him but refused. Given that level of ignorance and outright homophobia, providing these services to AIDS victims was a courageous decision for the young business, as they risked being blackballed by doctors who refused to refer patients. Much of the care HCO provided to AIDS patients was given free of charge, something made possible by profits generated from the sheer volume of HCO business. It was, like so many other sacrifices made by gay men on behalf of other gay men, a labor of love.³⁴

Specialized health care finally came to Oklahoma City when Northwinds, the first long-term care facility in Oklahoma for AIDS patients, opened in May of 1994, the product of much soul-searching and hard work by Judy and Tom Crane. The Cranes purchased a decaying nursing home located on Portland Avenue, on April 1, 1994, determined to help AIDS and HIV sufferers. “People were terrified” of AIDS even then, “for most of them, we are all they’ve got.” Crane watched her mother receive good, compassionate care during her unsuccessful battle with cancer, yet she saw HIV and AIDS patients receive terribly poor care in the very same facilities. “I didn’t like that at all!” The initial days were 20-hours-long, as the OSDH gave the pair only one month to

³⁴ “Home Health Care Expands for HIV/AIDS Patients,” *Gayly Oklahoman*, 5/15/1994, 7.

correct deficiencies left over from the previous owners' inspections or else they would lose their license. The fact that no regulations for nursing facilities devoted to AIDS care existed in 1994 also complicated matters, as Northwinds literally helped write the book on such matters as they went along.³⁵

All of the hard work paid off, as the first patient moved in on May 1, 1994. Although Northwinds welcomed non-HIV-positive patients, almost all of the residents at the twenty-nine-bed facility were HIV-positive. At first, Northwinds focused on end-stage health care, but with newer treatments and drug cocktails, their goal shifted to help restore health, so people could return home if they wished. Residents received excellent care and corollary support – everything from nutritional advice and social services to transportation -- and the facilities included a small chapel, exercise equipment, and common space for gatherings and family visits. When end-of-life care became necessary, they provided that as well. Northwinds is still one of the only total-care facilities in the southwest, and they care for patients from Louisiana, Kansas, Texas, and even as far away as Hawaii. All of them state that nothing quite like Northwinds exists in their home state.³⁶

Sadly, even by 1994 when Northwinds opened, Oklahomans remained painfully uninformed about AIDS and how the disease spread. One of the first patients Crane welcomed at Northwinds transferred from a nursing home in eastern Oklahoma County. “Fred” had never known what the touch of another caregiver felt like. At his previous

³⁵ Judy Crane, telephone interview by author, 8/10/2005; “First Oklahoma AIDS Nursing Home Opens in OKC,” *Gayly Oklahoman*, 5/15/1994, 7.

³⁶ Ibid.

facilities, nursing assistants brought his medicine to him on a disposable tray, and they trashed all of his drinking and eating utensils after he used them. Fred was surprised that Crane touched him, and that they allowed him to paint his room any color he wished. He chose green, something he had dreamed about since he was a child. He thoroughly enjoyed his new home until the disease forced him into the hospital one last time. Fred told his mother he could die then, however, because he finally got to live in his green room. “That makes it all worthwhile,” Crane related.³⁷

While the need for a facility like Northwinds was acute, Judy Crane found to her surprise how difficult it was to get started, as well as gain trust from members of the gay community. Of great concern to many AIDS activists and health care professionals was the fact that Northwinds was not a non-profit organization. The Cranes owned several nursing facilities in Oklahoma City, having been in the nursing field for over fifteen years, and Northwinds was neither their largest nor the most likely to be profitable. “I assumed we wouldn’t make a profit anyway, but that non-profit issue was a big stumbling block for some,” Crane recalled. Some Oklahoma AIDS activists were also troubled because Crane was straight, and married. Apparently, with few exceptions, AIDS in 1995 was still a self-help proposition according to gay and bisexual residents of Oklahoma City. Colleagues and friends asked her point blank, ‘Why are you helping them? Do you have AIDS?’ “It was just sad,” remembers Crane.³⁸ Despite the rocky beginnings, though, Northwinds eventually won over any doubters with the quality of

³⁷ Judy Crane, telephone interview by author, 8/10/2005.

³⁸ Ibid.

care that residents received and the compassion that the Cranes exhibited for all who walked through their doors.

By 2000, residents in Oklahoma, and Oklahoma City, managed AIDS rather well. Years of leg work by dedicated health professionals and gay activists had created an environment where HIV-positive and AIDS-stricken residents could find access to health care, education, housing, employment, and a variety of other services, all designed to make their lives as full and productive as possible. Ignorance, homophobia, and discrimination continue of course, and probably always will. The political establishment in the state of Oklahoma let down residents with HIV and AIDS, from the beginning. Politicians refused to make money available, for either prevention or health care, until federal money started to flow with such programs as RWCA. They argued about nuances of sex education and how providing money for AIDS would appear to condone homosexuality instead of concentrating on keeping the disease under wraps. This forced the gay and bisexual community in Oklahoma City to take much of the responsibility for AIDS amelioration on its shoulders, and they rose to the occasion. In most respects, AIDS was a gay disease in Oklahoma well into the 1990s, and the numbers bear that out. Drawing on the tradition of grass-roots activism provided by OHR, and emboldened by the courage shown by community members during the Angles controversy, gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents took it upon themselves to organize, raise money, alter their sexual habits, and reach out to their brothers and sisters in need. They did so as well as any other gay and lesbian subculture in the United States, albeit with a lower-profile. They had no choice.

Chapter X

Epilogue: The Dickensian Gay and Bisexual Male

World in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

By the dawn of the millennium, the Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male world had made impressive strides. Northwest 39th Street provided gay residents with a number of gay bars in which they could safely socialize, and Glitter Alley was almost devoid of a police presence. A string of political victories – starting with the Helm Bill and continuing on through the Angles controversy -- gave gay and bisexual men the confidence to pursue their civil rights. The reaction of the LGBT community to AIDS, which was self-help by necessity, seemed to unite the community as never before. The Oklahoma City gay and bisexual community was at its zenith by 2000.

That tradition of success extended into 2001, when a controversy erupted following the Cimarron Alliance Foundation's attempt to hang banners on utility poles in Oklahoma City promoting gay history month celebrations. Cimarron Alliance Foundation was a non-profit lobbying and education group that in 1997 formed out of an earlier political action committee called the Cimarron Alliance. Cimarron Alliance Foundation increasingly found itself on the cutting edge of numerous gay and lesbian political issues in Oklahoma City, and this issue would be no exception. Oklahoma City had allowed groups to hang banners on over one thousand utility pole brackets since

1989, when celebrations of the Oklahoma Land Run centennial and the Oklahoma Olympic Festival occurred, as a way to keep people informed of events. Bill Rogers was a key member of Cimarron and he helped design the banners, which were tasteful yet powerful. They included a representation of a torch, burning with the colors of the gay rainbow, surrounded by Cimarron's central message, "Education, Enlightenment, Equality." The Cimarron Foundation chose to hang their banners on forty-four of the poles located along Classen Boulevard, a heavily traveled street in Oklahoma City, and they applied for and received all necessary permits. City employees hung the banners and all seemed well until Oklahoma City Mayor Kirk Humphreys ordered the banners removed. His reason was simply that he did not think they were appropriate. "They (homosexuals) have a right to behave that way if they want to – although some aspects of it are illegal quite frankly. I find it offensive that we won't put up a religious message, but we will put up an irreligious message." The *Daily Oklahoman* agreed with Humphreys, deriding Cimarron as a "bullying political group," and compared the matter to a "similar" situation in Mississippi involving the Ku Klux Klan's attempt to be part of their state's adopt-a-highway program. "At least the Klan wasn't pushing a political agenda on the sign," noted the editorial. Lawyers for Cimarron contacted the city and threatened to sue over the matter, and Humphreys agreed to reinstall their banners while city leaders searched for a solution.¹

Kirk Humphreys, like a number of politicians in Oklahoma City and Oklahoma County, was a devout Christian man who openly expressed his religious convictions. The successful Republican businessman made no secret of his distaste for homosexuality,

¹ "Mayor Urging Change in City Banner Policy," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/11/2001, 1, 6a; "Bully Pulpit: Banners No Place for 'Gay' Agenda," *Daily Oklahoman*, 7/13/2001, 8.

and he ran for Mayor of Oklahoma City on the rather popular though ill-defined notion of ‘family values.’ On the other side of the issue was Bill Rogers, the long-time political activist and attorney who was involved with the Cimarron banners from the beginning. Rogers saw this as a key test as to how far the Oklahoma City LGBT community had traveled politically over the last twenty years, and he felt confident that the Cimarron banners would annoy some people, but he was unprepared for the reaction from Humphreys.

Well...we knew we would get a reaction. We didn’t know they would take them down, but we knew they would be controversial. He (Humphreys) said he got a lot of calls, but I think he would have done it (removed them) anyway. He’s a conservative, Christian fundamentalist that talks to God, and God talks back. I had a meeting with him. He was very cordial, he has a very winning personality, and after about 35 minutes he told me “not no but hell no” (Bill’s paraphrase), and that if we sued him, so what!²

Over the next two months, Humphreys, city manger Jim Couch, and other like-minded city council members labored to find a way to block Cimarron’s banners for good. In August of 2001, the city council adopted by a 6-3 vote a new ordinance that denied permits for any banners that contained a political, religious, or social advocacy message. The ban on commercial advertising also remained in effect. Only those messages that “promote or celebrate the city, its civic institutions, or public activities or events” would be allowed.³ Legal experts and even some members of the city council warned that the ordinance would likely never withstand a constitutional test. Councilwomen Amy Brooks, Willa Johnson, and Ann Simank wondered who would

² Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

³ Quote from policy taken from “Council Examines Policy on Banner, Bench Messages,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/15/2001, 4;

evaluate the merits of a banner application, and how those standards could ever be applied in any uniform way. Apparently, Mayor Humphreys did not care. “We do get sued by people all the time.” In Humphreys’ view, the banners pushed a homosexual agenda or message that was social in nature and thus should be prohibited. It was a battle that the *Daily Oklahoman* found worthwhile. “A group that already considers itself persecuted will no doubt cast itself as the targeted victim of the policy change. The real victims, though, could be a city that is one day forced by this group to fly no banners.”⁴ Although by most accounts this was a doomed position to take – to deny a significant portion of Oklahoma City residents their 1st Amendment rights -- Humphreys and company pursued it anyway.⁵

So with the help of the ACLU, the Cimarron Alliance Foundation sued Oklahoma City in December of 2001, after another gay organization – Peace House – tried to get a permit under the new ordinance to hang gay pride banners. Attorneys Michael Salem and Mark Henricksen filed the suit, and they argued simply that the city ordinance was arbitrary, malicious, and a clear violation of free speech rights. Chief Federal Judge for the Western District in Oklahoma Robin Cauthron agreed and declared unconstitutional the “social advocacy” restrictions Oklahoma City officials placed on the banners.

⁴ “Ex-Councilman Assails City Banner Proposal,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/25/2001, 442; “City adopts New Laws on Banners,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/29/2001, 1. The *Daily Oklahoman* buried former city councilman Eric Groves’s prophetic warning that the ordinance would fail on page 442 of the newspaper. Groves represented the owners of Angles and several residents in lawsuits against Oklahoma City for police brutality in 1983.

⁵ Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2005. Rogers, as a successful veteran in litigation against Oklahoma anti-gay measures, would be a formidable opponent in any kind of anti-discrimination lawsuit. In his conversation with Humphrey, Rogers strongly suggested that this case was not winnable, but the mayor refused to acquiesce. The resulting legal wrangling cost Oklahoma City over \$1,000,000.

Cauthron noted that “the ordinance allows a subjective determination by the official as to what banner qualifies as a ‘political, religious or social advocacy message’...and may be enforced only against those who express unpopular opinions and may thus be used as a device for censorship.” After Cauthron’s ruling, a settlement was reached between Oklahoma City and Cimarron that required city officials to cease enforcing the ordinance, gave Cimarron the unfettered right to hang banners again in the upcoming 2003 Pride Week celebrations in June 2003, and prohibited city authorities from amending the policy until the following January. A disappointed Mayor Humphreys announced that he and city manager Jim Crouch would enforce the ruling, although they vowed to explore other options. The city council accepted the settlement 8-1, the lone holdout being Brent Rinehart.⁶

There were other national issues affecting LGBT Americans decided between 2003 and 2005 that should have been close to any Oklahoma City gay or bisexual man’s heart. In 2003, the U. S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision, *Lawrence v. Texas*. This case overturned the court’s 1986 decision in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, which reaffirmed the right of states to enact anti-sodomy laws for consenting adults, and had been used in some states to prohibit sexual relationships only between homosexuals. At that juncture, Oklahoma was one of only thirteen states with active anti-sodomy laws in place, and only one of four that precluded gay sodomy only. Oklahoma’s law had been on the books since 1890 and remained substantially unchanged until 1986, when an

⁶ “City Ban on Banners Overturned,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/17/2002, 1; “Mayor to Enforce Ruling Allowing Gay and Lesbian Parade Banners,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/18/2002, 10; “Xx,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/9/2002, 1; “Council to Let OG&E Decide Banner Issue,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 2/5/2003, 1. Eventually, the city council decided to dump the whole banner problem on the owner of the utility poles, Oklahoma Gas and Electric. They were not thrilled with the new administrative responsibilities.

Oklahoma appeals court lifted the ban on heterosexual sodomy. Granted, prosecutions rarely if ever happened under the archaic law, but the fact that the law still existed, and applied only to homosexuals, served as a symbolic statement of how Oklahomans so casually ascribed second-class citizenship to gays and lesbians.⁷ Local long-time activist Keith Smith referred to the *Lawrence* decision as a “monumental ruling...It’s a great day to be an American, but an even greater day to be a gay American.”⁸ Yet, the reaction from the gay community in Oklahoma City was somewhat reserved. Although a powerful, if obscure, impediment to GLBT equality had finally been struck down, the average queer man in Oklahoma City failed to be energized by the *Lawrence* decision. “It didn’t affect me much. Gay people had sex before *Lawrence*, and they continue to have it after. It was important I guess, but it didn’t change my life one bit,” remarked Manny, a forty-year resident of Oklahoma City.⁹

The string of successes – at both the state and national levels -- that the gay and bisexual male world in Oklahoma City enjoyed was about to end, however, and it started in early 2004. HB 1821 was up for consideration by the state legislature, a bill that originally clarified how Oklahoma registered foreign adoptions. An amendment was added by senate Republican leader James Williamson from Tulsa that stated Oklahoma would not recognize legal adoptions by homosexuals in other states, or by those attempting to adopt Oklahoma children. Apparently, courts in Massachusetts and

⁷ Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

⁸ “Sodomy Statute Rejected,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 6/27/2003, 1; George Chauncey, “What Gay Studies Taught the Court: The Historians Amicus Brief in *Lawrence v. Texas*,” *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 10, no.3 (2004).

⁹ Manny, interview by author, Oklahoma City, 7/14/2005; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 2/19/2005; Joseph Kirk, email interview by author, 1/12/2005.

Washington asked the Oklahoma State Health Department (OSHD) to alter the names on two state-issued birth certificates for children adopted by gay male couples. Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson issued an opinion saying that although Oklahoma prohibited gays from adopting, state law mandated that the OSHD recognize legal adoptions in other states, regardless of whether the parents were same-sex or not. This elicited a firestorm at the state capitol, as three freshman congressmen promised to clarify the law and prevent any more altered birth certificates for gay adoptions. Williamson authored the amendment, although those initially pushing the issue included Representative Thad Balkman, a Republican from Norman, Representative Lance Cargill, a Republican from Harrah, and Senator Glenn Coffee, a Republican from Oklahoma City. “I strongly believe, and I think the vast majority of Oklahomans believe, that children should not be adopted by gay parents, and we don’t want to recognize an adoption formed by two people of the same sex,” Williamson argued. Central to the debate was the issue of whether both parents’ names would be added to a child’s birth certificate, even if the parents were of the same sex. HB 1821 would mandate that only one parent’s name would be listed on any birth certificate issued by Oklahoma if the out-of-state adoption was by a gay couple. The bill sailed through both houses of congress, and Governor Brad Henry signed the bill on May 3rd. It effectively ended any hope that gay and lesbian Oklahomans could legally adopt children together and have completely equal parental rights.¹⁰

¹⁰ “Gay Issues: AG Gives Opinion,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/20/2004, 1; “Senate Passes Measure Concerning Adoptions,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 4/13/2004, 6; “State Bill Reaffirms Stance on Adoption by Gays,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 5/1/2004, 7; “Adoption Ban among 17 Bills Signed,” *Daily Oklahoman*, May 4, 2004, 3.

Oklahomans also tackled the explosive political issue of gay marriage, again as an outgrowth of national debates following events in Vermont and Massachusetts. Gay and lesbian issues played a large role in the 2004 political elections, with Democrats and Republicans taking sides on sensitive issues like gay marriage, adoption, and domestic partnership rights. President George W. Bush faced pressure not only from Log Cabin Republicans and other moderates in his party to assume a more inclusive stance on issues like gay marriage, but he was clearly at odds with his running mate, Richard Cheney, over gay marriage and partner benefits. The President also received criticism from conservative Republicans who demanded that a more forceful denunciation of “anti-family” issues relating to homosexuality be made. The issue was a powerful one that motivated local conservatives all over the United States to push for state constitutional amendments to define marriage as being between a man and a woman. Eleven states had such amendments on their November 2004 ballot. Oklahoma was one of them.¹¹

The initiative to ban same-sex marriages in or their recognition by Oklahoma was introduced in the legislature by state senate Republican leader James Williamson of Tulsa and Republican state representative Thad Balkman of Norman, Oklahoma, both of whom sponsored the ban on Oklahoma adoptions several months earlier. Williamson, an evangelical Christian, argued that “I don’t like that behavior. If they want to live their life quietly, in the privacy of their homes, that’s freedom in America. But when you want to force the rest of us to accept a new definition of marriage, we’re not going to

¹¹ “Both Sides Plot Strategy,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/12/2004, 9a. The other states besides Oklahoma were Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, Utah, and Oregon. All of the measures passed.

stand for that.”¹² Thad Balkman, a Republican state representative from Norman and a committed supporter of anything anti-queer, echoed that statement: “It’s pretty much a cut-and-dried, black-and-white issue.”¹³

The response from the gay and bisexual community in Oklahoma City was surprisingly tepid. Many seemed to believe that passage of SQ 711 was virtually guaranteed, and the cost of a protracted political fight to educate Oklahomans about the full impact of the bill would be tremendous. “I was surprised it even made it on the ballot,” recalled Keith Smith, who has made a career of seeing legislation killed that was harmful to gays in Oklahoma.¹⁴ A court challenge was seen as the last, best hope to keep the issue off of the ballot and out of the Oklahoma constitution. Long-time activist Bill Rogers played a prominent role in the case, but only after another high-profile attorney backed out, largely due to the politics surrounding the amendment.

When this marriage thing came up...somebody else suggested Jimmie Goodman, president of Crowe and Dunleavy, the largest law firm in the state, and they have a lot more clout than I do. People pay attention when Crowe and Dunleavy speak, whether you like it or not, including judges. Jimmie’s firm was divided on whether or not he ought to do it and he got a lot of heat. Finally, he backed out---nobody’s mad about it of course---and it came back to me. I told them I would do it only if Mark Henrickson would do it with me.¹⁵

On August 27, 2004, the ACLU filed a lawsuit in state court on behalf of twelve residents seeking to prevent State Question 711 from being placed on the November ballot. Their legal arguments were simple, but compelling. The United States Supreme

¹² “Gays Face Decision to Stay or Leave,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/20/2004, page 7a.

¹³ “Both Sides Plot Strategy,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/12/2004, 9a.

¹⁴ Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005.

¹⁵ Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

Court held in *Loving v. Virginia* that marriage is a fundamental right guaranteed to all Americans. That case dealt with interracial marriage, but the ruling did not specify marriage only between people of the opposite sex, rather it said all Americans are entitled to the benefit of marriage. The legal argument also relied on *Roemer v. Evans*, which had identified gays as a protected group, as well as portions of the 14th Amendment. Bill Rogers believed that the question also violated the 1st Amendment rights of freedom of religion and the establishment clause. “It criminalizes a preacher who performs same-sex marriage. Now, if Robin Meyers chooses to perform same-sex marriages in his community church or Kathy McCalley in hers, this law deprives them of that right. It is the state stepping into church activity and I think that is an argument that would even appeal to a Baptist, one that had any sense at all!” Even more obvious to them, the question violated a fundamental principle in how state questions could be presented to voters in Oklahoma by addressing more than one issue in the petition. The lawsuit argued that SQ 711 would not only outlaw same-sex marriage but would also outlaw domestic partnerships and civil unions and common-law marriages between heterosexuals. “The voter is not given a clear choice – people who would vote against marriage but for civil unions are not going to know (how to express that).”¹⁶

Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson issued an opinion that said the plaintiffs had failed to show that SQ 711 was unconstitutional, as written, and amendment sponsors Thad Balkman and James Williamson argued that this was a “desperate attempt” to avoid a vote on an issue that gays knew they would lose.

¹⁶ “Attorneys Argue Impact of Same-Sex Ballot Issue,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/9/2004, 10a; “Gay Activists Put Hopes in Court Intervention,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/17/2004, 11a; Bill Rogers, interview by author, 9/18/2004.

Editorials in the *Daily Oklahoman* echoed that sentiment, and they took aim at an old foe – the ACLU – for the “hypocrisy of a group that has long claimed the high ground when it comes to protecting constitutional rights. The pre-emptive strike against State Question 711 is a slap at direct democracy, an attempt to circumvent the right of the people to vote on the major issues of our time...it will likely pass by one of the largest margins of any state question in history.”¹⁷

Gay activist Terry Gatewood, one of the founders of Cimarron Alliance, attacked SQ 711 on the possible long-range negative impact it could have on luring new businesses to Oklahoma. “The majority of large and many mid-sized corporations already offer domestic partnership benefits...We can no longer afford to continue our state’s reputation of ignorance and intolerance. It’s counterproductive to have our chamber of commerce touting Oklahoma City as a diverse and tolerant work environment, then vote for discrimination to be legalized in our constitution.” The average gay resident in Oklahoma City did not get involved in the legal aspects of the challenge, but felt that SQ 711 was silly and pointless anyway, since Oklahoma law already prohibited gay marriage. One resident, who had been committed to his life partner for over twenty-eight years, said it best. “The fact is that gay people do not want anything extra. We want just the regular stuff -- I can go see Jimmy in the hospital. He

¹⁷ “Marriage Lawsuit Hearing Today,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/8/2004, 6a; “Advocacy Overload: ACLU Seems at Odds with Itself,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 8/27/2004, 12a; “Jumping the Gun: SQ 711 Challenge Based on Fear,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/13/2004, 8a.

can inherit the house if I drop dead – those types of regular things that most people are accustomed to having.”¹⁸

The Oklahoma State Supreme Court heard arguments on September 9th, and in a surprising development, the justices voted 7-0 to refuse jurisdiction in the case. Justice Yvonne Kauger noted that a post-November challenge might provide the court with jurisdiction, but that the plaintiffs filed their petition too late to reasonably expect an injunction, as absentee ballots had already been printed and mailed out to voters. Justice Marian Opala argued that plaintiffs failed to identify “even a single fatal state or federal flaw” in SQ 711.¹⁹ Supporters were very pleased, as most polls indicated that Oklahomans overwhelmingly would support the measure, so their battle was effectively done. They also had powerful blocks of supporters, such as the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma, which numbered some 775,000 members, whose ministers frequently spoke about the issue at church throughout the campaign season.²⁰

Gay rights activists, gay residents, and sympathetic straight residents in Oklahoma City vowed to fight on, and they did so in creative ways. An advertisement, paid for by Cimarron Equality Oklahoma, appeared in the *Daily Oklahoman* starting on October 24th that featured Vice-President Richard Cheney saying “People should be free to enter into any kind of relationship they want to enter into,” to which supporters chortled “Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. We couldn’t have said it better.” Cheney made headlines in the weeks leading up to the November 2004 presidential election by breaking with

¹⁸ Terry Gatewood, “Legalizing Discrimination,” *Daily Oklahoman* (10/27/2004), 17a; “Gay Activists Put Hopes in Court Intervention,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/17/2004, 11a.

¹⁹ “Same-Sex Ban Stays on Ballot,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 9/24/2004, 1a.

²⁰ “Gay Activists Put Hopes in Court Intervention,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/17/2004, 11a.

conservatives and President Bush in support of his daughter, Mary Cheney, who is a lesbian.²¹ The Oklahoma Freedom and Equality Coalition gathered a group of clergy members sympathetic to gay and lesbian causes to fight the issue in their churches. They included ministers from Anglican, Lutheran, Quaker, Presbyterian, Unitarian, Methodist, and United Church of Christ denominations, and they framed their struggle in terms of the great Biblical upset, David over Goliath.²²

In the end, the issue was never truly in doubt, as Oklahomans overwhelmingly approved SQ 711 with support totals topping 75%, and Oklahoma joined ten other states in banning gay marriage. Only Mississippi's amendment passed by a greater margin than Oklahoma's. It was an expected but painful blow to many gay residents in Oklahoma. Tulsa Oklahomans for Human Rights president Mark Bonney said, "We couldn't get married before, so it didn't create any larger legal hurdle, but it's got to hurt, when you know that three out of four of your neighbors don't want you around. It was a statement of hate." That statement of hate hurt gay and bisexual men, and some considered leaving Oklahoma over it, but an even larger number decided to file lawsuits, raise money for gay causes, and continue fighting for the everyday fight for acceptance.²³

In a very odd turn of events, only six weeks after Oklahomans voted to ban gay marriage, a new anti-bias employment policy made its way through channels in Oklahoma County, one that made Oklahoma County government one of the most progressive in the nation in regard to gay employment rights. The Oklahoma County

²¹ *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/24/2004, 12a.

²² "Group Fights Marriage Amendment," *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/22/2004, 15a.

²³ "Gays Face Decision to Stay or Leave," *Daily Oklahoman*, 12/20/2004, 7a.

Budget Board, a group of eight elected county officials, approved a new anti-discrimination policy on December 15, 2004, just over a month after Oklahomans resoundingly passed SQ 711. The Board of County Commissioners approved it the following day, and both votes were unanimous. The policy added sexual orientation, medical problems, and political beliefs under the broad rubric of personal and professional characteristics that were protected from discrimination in hiring practices for Oklahoma County employees. It was a stunning achievement, as neither state nor federal law prohibited discrimination in the workplace for gays and lesbians. The shift came in response to several lawsuits filed against Oklahoma County charging workplace discrimination and wrongful termination, all of which had cost Oklahoma County taxpayers over \$1 million since 1998 alone.²⁴

The authors of the change, Oklahoma County district one Commissioner Jim Roth and director of human resources Dan Matthews, believed that the change represented excellent fiscal policy and, “it’s the right thing to do.” Matthews welcomed the change, because he knew that Oklahoma County could be a leader in Oklahoma, and the nation, on reevaluating discrimination in the workplace. “Through some training I had been to on employment law, I recognized our policy was probably not as thorough as it needed to be...I think we also wanted to send a statement to applicants and employees that as an organization we don’t tolerate discrimination or harassment of any kind, at any level.”²⁵

²⁴ “Civil Rights Activists Hail Move,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/6/2005, 6a. The Oklahoma County Budget Board formed in response to the widespread county commissioner scandal that rocked Oklahoma in the 1980s. Its purpose was to provide checks and balances on county commissioner boards, which wield incredible power in counties all over Oklahoma. For a thorough discussion of the scandal, see Harry Holloway, *Bad Times for Good ‘Ol Boys: The Oklahoma County Commissioner Scandal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

Roth was in his zenith as county commissioner. The first openly gay public official ever elected in Oklahoma County, Roth defeated incumbent Beverly Hodges in a rough campaign during which Hodge's supporters reminded voters of Roth's homosexuality time and again. To their credit, and the massive grassroots effort that gay and lesbian campaign workers put out to get Roth elected, a majority of district one residents looked past the smears and voted for him. Young, smart, energetic, and committed to making Oklahoma County government accessible and functional, Roth immediately sought to streamline district one. He cut excess staff, realigned funding priorities, and tried to eliminate waste whenever possible.

As a result of the changes he instituted, Roth made as many enemies as he did friends, and drew the ire of those who opposed his lifestyle as much as they opposed his political beliefs. Less than one day after the story announcing the anti-discrimination policy ran in the *Daily Oklahoman*, newly-elected district two Commissioner Brent Rinehart came out and publicly attacked Roth, the anti-bias policy, and firmly stated his wish to reverse it. Rinehart was a member of the Oklahoma City Council during the banner controversy, and he was the only member to vote against accepting the settlement that allowed Cimarron to fly their banners. An evangelical Southern Baptist, one who viewed public office as a "gift from God," Rinehart won his post during the previous November election, but his term did not begin until January 2005, almost a month after officials cast the unanimous vote in favor of the anti-bias policy. Rinehart vowed to ask state legislators to "take appropriate action...(to prevent) future attacks upon our traditional family values." Fervently anti-homosexual, he believed that the policy

²⁵ "Civil Rights Activists Hail Move," *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/6/2005, 6a.

“legitimizes and endorses something that doesn’t necessarily agree with traditional values.”²⁶

On January 12, district three Commissioner Stan Inman, one of those who voted in favor of the anti-bias policy less than a month earlier, sided with Rinehart and asked that personnel director Dan Matthews create a new employment discrimination policy, one that did not include sexual orientation under the umbrella of protected elements. Inman stated that he had not read Matthews’ recommendation regarding the change in employment policy in December 2004, but assumed that Matthews knew the law and would bring Oklahoma County’s policy in line with current trends. Roth dissented, of course, and vehemently replied that “I think it’s bad business for Oklahoma County to suggest it will tolerate any form of workplace discrimination. They want to be vague and hide their intention, but the reality is that they are asking for permission to discriminate at taxpayer risk.” The 2-1 vote placed the issue back before the Oklahoma County Budget Board for approval, which was made up of the three commissioners, and the five other elected county officials, including the Oklahoma county clerk, and county treasurer. At that point, the Board voted 4-4 to keep the policy, but that settled matters for only a short time.²⁷

The *Daily Oklahoman* publicized the conflict between Roth and Inman, and took advantage of the political maelstrom that had brewed at the highest levels of Oklahoma County government for some time to conflate the nondiscrimination policy with other,

²⁶ “Xx,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 10/9/2002, 1; “Rinehart Seeks Policy Reversal,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/7/2005, 7a.

²⁷ “Workplace Bias Policy Change Requested,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/13/2005, 1.

more nefarious events over the previous year. Oklahoma County ClerkCarolynn Caudill had been under fire for using her staff and computers in her office to look at personnel files and other sensitive documents that belonged to other county officials without authorization. Caudill claimed it was incidental and part of a security sweep her office conducted, but it looked bad. There were also conflicts between Caudill and other county officials involving their right to freely peruse her records and budget issues, and the atmosphere surrounding Oklahoma County government was both contentious and political. An editorial that ran the day after Rinehart requested a reversal of the anti-discrimination policy called Roth and Caudill’s actions a “breach of trust”and intimated that Roth had pushed the policy through “under the radar,” without consulting Rinehart or publicizing it for public debate. “Most county residents would probably oppose the discrimination policy because it treats ‘sexual orientation’ as the equivalent of race and skin color. We doubt that most citizens are convinced this is true.”²⁸

The events that followed played to this political turmoil and things quickly escalated. Before the Oklahoma Board of Commissioners could vote on Rinehart’s request to amend the anti-discrimination policy, Rinehart and Inman voted 2-1 – once again with Roth dissenting – to eliminate the budget board effective July 1st and give control over Oklahoma County’s \$53 million budget back to the three-member county commissioner board. Rinehart and Inman proposed that an excise board made up of people appointed by the commissioners and the Oklahoma Tax Commission would oversee the budgets approved by the three commissioners. The announcement stunned

²⁸ “Breach of Trust: County Needs to Shore Up Procedures,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/12/2005, 14a.

board members and the community at-large. County Assessor Leonard Sullivan was infuriated at what he called a “two-person coup” and chided the commissioners for rushing to judgment. Sullivan also questioned why the Budget Board, made up of elected officials already drawing a salary, would need to be replaced by a paid commission made up of new workers who would draw over \$120,000 annually in salaries. County Treasurer Butch Freeman called it a “rush to power,” and begged commissioners to put the vote off until county officials and the general public could weigh in on the issue. Inman countered that members of the Budget Board continually overstepped their bounds, citing Sheriff John Whetsel’s attempt to take over the emergency management office, Carolyn Caudill’s attempt to have the computer division answer directly to her instead of county commissioners, and other members’ refusal to submit information to the newly-created personnel office. He argued that no board was better than a corrupt board.²⁹

The Budget Board had been around for years and had been responsible for administering Oklahoma County fiscal affairs since the county commissioner scandals of the 1980s.³⁰ By removing the budget board, the Oklahoma County Commissioners had a huge amount of discretionary power, not only with budget issues, but also on a wide range of policy decisions, including employment policy. To be fair, the political problems between Caudill and the other commissioners played a large role in their decision to quash the board, but Rinehart made his feelings about homosexuals known

²⁹ “County Plan to Cut Panel May Cost,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/25/2005, 1; “Commissioners Vote to Disband County’s Budget Board,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 1/27/2005, 1.

³⁰ For an in-depth look at the state-wide Oklahoma county commissioner scandal, see Harry Holloway, *Bad Times for Good Ol’ Boys: The Oklahoma County Commissioner Scandal*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

early and often. It would be naïve to believe that his conflict with Roth over the anti-discrimination policy did not play a part in the decision.

The issue simmered for the next couple of months while commissioners and county officials jockeyed for position. In March, Commissioner Rinehart asked the Budget Board, as one of its last major duties, to redefine the sexual orientation in the anti-bias policy to apply only to heterosexuals. Roth exploded at the meeting: “You need to stop wasting taxpayer money on political or personal vendettas. To suggest that we need to define terms in a nondiscrimination policy hearkens back to a time when blacks were considered three-fifths of an American. I really think this is getting to the point of absurdity.” Rinehart insisted that he wanted only a clear definition of what “sexual orientation” meant. However, when assistant district attorney Michelle Day informed the commissioners that the Federal Office of Personnel Management used a much broader conceptualization of sexual orientation – one that included bisexuals, heterosexuals, and homosexuals – Rinehart backed off. “All I want is a definition,” he told Board members.³¹ The political machinations surrounding the Budget Board’s imminent demise kept commissioners busy for the rest of the summer months, and the Board dissolved without ever changing the policy. The issue moved to the state level when in March of 2005, Tulsa Republican representative Daniel Sullivan introduced and passed a bill that did away with any non-discrimination policies adopted in Oklahoma by local governments that included sexual orientation in their language. Ultimately the bill

³¹ “Nondiscrimination Policy Change Urged,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/9/2005, 6; “County Asks to Define ‘Orientation’,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/10/2005, 1.

never became law, but it spoke to the level of homophobia coursing over the Oklahoma plains in 2005.³²

As if the political issues were not enough, much of the Oklahoma City LGBT community was surprised to learn that a landmark in the community – Angles – was closing. The controversial and pioneering disco club that helped establish 39th Street as “Glitter Alley,” Angles closed on a daily basis in October 2005. Owners Scott Wilson and Don Hill cited a lack of business as the cause, but others pointed to poor management and stiffer competition from newer nightspots in Bricktown as well as the Copa, which features female impersonator Rachael Erikks, formerly the star of Angles.³³ For several years Angles had fought to keep its customer base by remodeling the club, booking new talent and DJs, offering drink specials, and trying to introduce the club to a new generation of Oklahoma LGBT residents. Ultimately, they failed to recapture their core audience, and the club is now only open for special occasions and drag pageants.³⁴

Shortly after the Angles announcement, Don Hawkins, owner and editor of *The Gayly Oklahoman*, announced that the January 15th edition would be the final issue

³² House Bill Stirs Uproar,” *Daily Oklahoman*, 3/13/2005, 6a.

³³ “Hard News Online Takes Look at Top 10 OKC News Stories for 2005.” *Hard News Online* 4, no. 4 (26 January 2006). Bricktown is a euphemism applied to an area encompassing several streets in downtown Oklahoma City, east of Broadway, that include Sheridan (formerly Grand Avenue), Reno, and California, where many of the streets are still paved with bricks. A plethora of bars, entertainment spots, and sporting events have transformed this formerly desolate area into the premier entertainment district in Oklahoma.

³⁴ “Floyd’s Newsletter.” 5, no. 32 (19 October 2005). Floyd Martin is a local gay social celebrity that knows most, if not all, of the important LGBT residents of Oklahoma City. He publishes a weekly newsletter that includes facts, observances, photographs, and historical information about the Oklahoma City LGBT subculture. Membership is free and available by emailing Floyd at ITZFLOYD@aol.com.

published. Despite weathering the death of co-founder Ron Shaffer, a devastating fire at Hawkin's home where the *Gayly* offices were housed, and a number of staff changes over the years, the paper was to cease production for a very simple and understandable reason: co-founder and editor Don Hawkins and partner Mick Shirron simply wished to devote more time to their family. Over the years, *The Gayly Oklahoman* provided readers with valuable community information, entertainment news, and celebrations of community achievements and political victories. Hawkins, Shaffer, and Shirron were important ambassadors for the Oklahoma City LGBT community through their work at the *Gayly*, and its loss would be keenly felt.³⁵ Fortunately, a refurbished version of the *Gayly*, as well as another new publication dedicated to LGBT community issues, are expected to begin circulation in March 2006.

Although lamentable, the closing of *Angles* and the publication cessation of *The Gayly Oklahoman* suggests that larger shifts in the acceptance of homosexuality in Oklahoma City have occurred. The growth of clubs in other parts of Oklahoma City, and the freedom that many younger gay and bisexual men feel to frequent them with straight friends or even groups of queer friends, suggests that the social climate in Oklahoma City has changed for the better. *The Gayly* suffered stiff competition in recent years from other alternative newspapers, such as the *Oklahoma Gazette*, and national publications like the *Advocate* and online news sources offered a more sophisticated product according to some. The fact that new publications – *Standout* and *Spectrum OKC* – stepped into the void so quickly after the *Gayly* folded speaks to the importance of queer newspapers in Oklahoma City and the resilience of those associated with their

³⁵ Paula Sophia, "The Gayly Goodbye," *Gayly Oklahoman*, 1/15/2006.

production.³⁶ In a way, it might be said that the increased tolerance of homosexuality, by spawning and supporting new sources of information, and the freedom to attend other clubs – a transition that both Angles and the *Gayly Oklahoman* helped initiate – ultimately led to their undoing.

On the other hand, with the stinging political defeats in 2005, Oklahoma City – and Oklahoma in general -- was becoming one of the most intolerant places for gays and lesbians to live. Yet the fundamental question that emerges, in light of the previous century of gay and bisexual presence in Oklahoma City, is “Why?” The historical record shows that gay and bisexual men developed a nourishing and visible subculture here, replete with bars, a network of home-based parties, openly gay residents, a variegated sexual landscape, and eventually an impressive political activism that met key challenges and homophobia head-on when motivated to do so. Issues like gay marriage, anti-discrimination, adoption, sodomy, police brutality, and domestic partner rights all are tied, one way or another, to a homosexual’s sense of self. The fact that Oklahoma denies certain rights and socially-valuable institutions to homosexuals, simply because of their sexual preference, would seem to inspire activism and determination from most gay and bisexual men, and women for that matter. Yet the community has not, and has never been, successful at combating the larger issues of inequality that plague gay and bisexual men all over the United States. In fairness, the major issues floating around Oklahoma between 2003-2005 -- gay marriage, gay adoptions, domestic partner issues – were outgrowths of the national debate on such matters, and the speed with which the

³⁶ “Hard News Online Takes Look at Top 10 OKC News Stories for 2005.” *Hard News Online* 4, no. 4 (26 January 2006). The staff at *HNO* and *The Gayly Oklahoman* engaged in more than a friendly rivalry since *HNO* debuted three years ago, so their perspective must be viewed with caution.

legislature codified discrimination in Oklahoma prevented a sustained defense from the gay and bisexual community.³⁷ Yet there seems to be something more at work here.

A number of explanations might suffice, the easiest being that queer inaction stems from religious intolerance. Oklahoma is perceived as such a religious and evangelical place to live that the gay and bisexual community's inaction on these critical issues is understandable, even expected. Oklahoma politicians use the Bible with aplomb at election time, now more than ever, warning citizens about the evils of queers and other sexual degenerates to obscure the fact that they have little political experience or substance, or that they might even be gay or bisexual. Religious arguments used by men like Curtis Harris attempted to destroy gay citizens' resolve, and to force them to accept second-class status. Yet that kind of religious bigotry has existed in Oklahoma since its founding, so to say that it crippled gay and bisexual formation, in light of previous successes, is likely inaccurate.

Another explanation might be the perceived lack of politically active men and women, a dearth in leadership so to speak, which is often used by national activists when discussing Oklahoma's failings. On the surface, that argument seems to fall easily, as the pioneering efforts by Bill Rogers, Keith Smith, Paul Thompson, and others guided the Oklahoma City gay community through so many of the key political fights of the 1970s and 1980s. The fact that they did so with a population that knew little of homophile organizations or Stonewall is amazing, and Rogers and Smith both had ties to national

³⁷ Keith Smith, interview by author, 7/20/2005. Smith, a long-time political activist and lobbyist, notes how flabbergasted he was that the issues seemed to literally sail through the Oklahoma legislature.

organizations that helped establish a current of activism that still courses through the Oklahoma political landscape.

That strong prolific cadre of activists has become something of a double-edged sword for the community, however, according to one local LGBT activist. Mark Timmons noted that he sees the same people at fund raisers, political events, protests, and in articles and news stories relating to the Oklahoma City LGBT community. Because of their visibility and hard work, they have “a strong sense of ownership” when it comes to local issues, and it is well-earned and deserved. Unfortunately, that sense of ownership is so strong that it chokes off attempts by younger people in the community to get involved. In fact, it is not unusual for “the old guard (to) cut them off at the knees in a graceful, southern-charmed backhanded compliment sort of way” whenever new leaderships tries to step up.³⁸

Of course, the argument might be made that the younger generation is simply not interested in political activism on the scale that Bill Rogers, Keith Smith, Paul Thompson, and others have exhibited – out of necessity -- for years. As a generation that grew up with more LGBT exposure on film, television, newspapers, and the general public discourse, they simply may not have the driving political force of their predecessors. For younger Oklahoma City queer residents, those who came of age after the establishment of 39th street and other aspects of community were in place, they did not feel the gut-wrenching fear that the purges of the 1950s engendered or men like Curtis Harris generated. They have little experience -- and little need for -- greater meta-

³⁸ Mark Timmons, “Commentary: The Leaders of Tomorrow?” *Hard News Online*, (www.hardnewsonline.com), v. 3, no 6, 12/15/2005.

political activism that it would take to change hearts and minds. Timmons summarizes the generational gap succinctly: “One cut their teeth on the Stonewall Riots, and the call to arms of a generation, while the other was plugged into VH1 and ‘Queer as Folk’. One generation had to fight for the right to simply love who they wanted, while the other fought over whom to love that week.”³⁹

It should be noted that the vision of the older generation of political stalwarts was not universally shared by their contemporaries. For gay and bisexual men who remained closeted for so long and suffered under the reign of Curtis Harris, the Angles controversy and the freedom provided by that settlement gave them the oasis on 39th street, and that, for their generation, was rather significant and perhaps “good enough.” As a result, GLBT, both young and old, pick their battles and do not fight those they know they will lose. This is often confused with apathy.

Perhaps Paul Thompson said it best: “Unfortunately, our gay community has been way better about responding to challenges than we have about figuring out where we want to go. It takes somebody poking us in the eye with a sharp stick.”⁴⁰ The Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male world is a reactionary group, by nature, the product of its birth and unique history. Primarily, gay and bisexual men at large have been unwilling to push for change on these issues in Oklahoma, or Oklahoma City, and they remained disconnected from the national gay rights movement for much of its history. While activists like Bill Rogers were heavily involved in organizations like the ACLU and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the average gay and bisexual Oklahoma City

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Paul Thompson, interview by author, 12/22/2004.

resident was not, and did not wish to be involved with them. Rogers noted after the Cimarron victory concerning the banner controversy that “it cemented Cimarron’s position in the community and let people know that we are a power to be reckoned with,” and he was probably correct. However the banner controversy, like most political and social fights undertaken within the gay community for the gay community in Oklahoma City, was once again fought by gay rights activists – the same gay rights activists.

Also at work here is a rather perverted “don’t ask, don’t tell” complex in Oklahoma City, much like the Southern benign pretense to ignorance that John Howard mentions in *Men Like That*. Queer behavior is often dismissed as genteel eccentricity or working-class coarseness, which allows Oklahomans to tolerate gay men at the same time it isolates them and promotes feelings of self-loathing.⁴¹ In a rather Faustian bargain, gay and bisexual men exist, albeit uncomfortably, in an environment laced with bigotry and hate. It is not even half a loaf, and it leads people from other states to assume that Oklahomans forced gay and bisexual men to languish in absolute silence, and that they never stepped to the plate to carve out a queer space for themselves.

That is a shame, because historically that caricature is completely false. The Oklahoma City gay and bisexual male subculture enjoyed a higher degree of success in establishing bars, socialization centers, sexualized spaces, and being visible at a time when it was increasingly uncomfortable for gay men all over the United States. The roots of that visibility extend back to the turn-of-the-century. In the 1960s, a powerful

⁴¹ John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), introduction; Rex Ball, interview by author, 1/14/2005; Ralph Prevette, interview by author, 1/12/2005 and 2/19/2005; Joe, interview by author, 3/14/2005; Jim McMurray, interview by author, 1/20/2005.

backlash pushed many of the more flamboyant members of the community back into the closet, and the Oklahoma City gay male subculture became more circumspect than ever before. This represented another reversal of national trends. Although the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969 was a remote event in the minds of many gay and bisexual Oklahoma City residents, they nonetheless met the challenges posed by homophobic legislators and AIDS in the 1970s and 1980s, bouncing back by creating a politically active and self-sustaining world of support for its members. The recent defeats on macro-issues like same-sex marriage and anti-discrimination were disappointing to be sure, but they are more indicative of long-range trends in the historical progression of Oklahoma's gay community than a complete absence of politicization or cultural legitimacy.

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Appendix A:
GAY, BISEXUAL, AND GAY-FRIENDLY BARS
IN THE OKLAHOMA CITY METROPOLITAN AREA,
1889-2004

Beer House (Near NW 16th and Linwood)

Opened in 1960 by Roger Pritchard and Bill Mitchell. Served steaks, lunches, etc.

Bishop's Tap Room (110 NW 1st)

Open since 1938 in back of Bishop's restaurant. Closed in 1969

The Bijou (2200 Northwest 39th)

Started by Tony Sinclair in 1984. It was designed to appeal to strait and gay audiences.

Blue Note Lounge (2408 North Robinson)

Robinson location owned by Zella Holub. Raided on 19 Dec 1964

Blue Lounge (231 West Grand)

Operated by Robert M. Hargrove. Open since end of WWII.

Crescendo Club (36th and May)

Opened by John Magevar in the 1970s.

The Mayflower (1135 NW 23rd)

Owned first by Roger Pritchard and Bill Mitchell. Then owned by Juanita H and Bobbie McGuiness. Open by Feb 1957. Still open by Dec 31, 1964

The Garden of Allah (2900 SW 29th)

Raided by Ok county sheriffs on 9 Feb 1938). Managed by W.J. Stander

Louie's Club 29 (2929 SW 29th)

Owned by Louis Strauch. First opened on 5/21/1941.

It'll Do (113 West Grand)

Open by 1943.

The Continental Club (Oklahoma-Logan County border)

Owned by Arnold Lee. Raided and closed on 28 Nov 1966.

Free Spirit (Classen Boulevard)
Started in the late 1970s by

Huggy Bares (39th Street)
Started by Lee Burris in the 1970s.

The Club (1724 NW 16th)
Owned by Roy Ray Mastin in about 1967. Private club, raided on 14 Feb 1969

The Jug (411 W Sheridan)
Owned by Thomas Leon Ryan. Raided 7 June 1965. Open since at least Spring 1963

Circus Club (221 West Grand)
Owned by Red Holder. "New" bar in August 1952. Open until 1955-56.

Derby Club (3133 NE 23rd)

The Frantic Attic (1133 NW 23rd)
Coffee shop located above Mayflower. Opened by Bill Mitchell and Roger Pritchard initially. Owned at one point by Nida Love.

The Urn

Club Burgundy (434 West Main)
Holiday Lounge Club, Inc. owned by Virginia White

The Mirror Lounge (14 North Hudson)
Open since at least 1947 at 14 North Hudson, when owned by Robert Hargrove. Incorporated as Club Mirror Lounge by G.C. Pierce, Leona Pierce, and W.B.Lowery on 5/3/1962. Open until at least 1981.

Sweet Leona's Lounge (231 West Grand)
Owned by Leona Pierce. Open in 1956 and open until 1968 at least.

The Click (On Classen, between 63rd Street and Britton Road)
Started by Bobby and Juanita after the Mayflower burned, 1964.

The Cleaners
Started and ran by Ralph Prevette. Sold to Paul Thompson in 1969-1970.

The Warehouse (919 North Hudson)
Owned by Woody Acklund. Open in late 1960s. Drag Ball raided on 15 Sept 1968

The Inferno Inn (9200 South Shields)

Owned first by Roger Pritchard and Bill Mitchell. Later owned by Bill Kennedy, and then Georgia and W.A. Coots. Open from 1958-1962.

Lee's Lounge (3004 Paseo)

First opened in 1965. Owned by Arnold Lee. Serious fire closed it as Lee's Lounge in 1968/1969, when it was leased to another person.

The Hi-Lo Club (1221 Northwest 50th)

Owned by Gil Ray

The Manhattan Club (221 West Grand)

Opened by 1959. Owned by Park Bingham

The Pink Flamingo

A lesbian bar, located inside the Free Spirit. Open by the early 1980s.

The Villa Royal (Located next to Lee's Lounge on Paseo)

Owned by Arnold Lee. Opened first in May 1969 and closed a few months later.

Red Lion (Northwest 40th and May Avenue)

Owned by Woody Acklund and Kenny Tivis later.

Rusty Nail (23rd and Portland)

Owned by Lee Burris

Circa 2201 Club (2201 NW 39th, 39th and Barnes)

Originally the Circa 2201 Club but eventually became just the Circa. Opened in December 1972. Owned by Kenny Tivis, owner of the Red Lion. Consolidated with Saddle Tramps (Gil Ray) and was re-christened Tramps.

The RoadHouse (Frontier City headquarters, I-35 and Hefner)

Owned by Arnold Lee. Ran from 1970-1978.

The Jungle Pit (Northwest 12th and May Avenue area)

Opened in 1960 by Roger Pritchard

Wreck Room (2127 Northwest 39th)

Under-18 club owned by Scott Wilson and Don Hill. First opened in 1984.

The Copa (2200 Northwest 39th)

Opened by Lee Burris in 1988. Located inside the Habanna Inn, a gay-themed hotel complex.

Club Levis (2805 NW 36th)

Originally known as the "Do Me."

Night-Life Club (2120 NW 39th)
Owned by Barbara Swepston

The Warehouse Juice Parlor (2124 NW 39th)

Trade Winds Club, aka HiLite Club (4910 N Lincoln)
Owned by Joe Wendell Moren

Tony's Club North (North Western)

Angles (2117 NW 39th)
Opened September 15, 1982 by Don Hill and Scott Wilson. Closed except for special occasions in late 2005.

The Outrigger (2460 NW 39th)
Open in 1970s in Rio Motor Hotel, by Arnold Lee. Now a battered women's shelter.

Saddle Tramps (2201 NW 39th)
Owned by Gil Ray, Larry Crosby, and another gentleman. Moved up the street and merged with the Circa 2201 Club in the early 1980s and was rechristened Saddle Tramps West. Now simply called Tramps, and is owned by Tony Sinclair and Hayden Allen.

Club Jamboree, aka Jake's Cowshed (633 NE 23rd)
Owned by Jake Samara

The Park (2125 Northwest 39th)
Opened in 1983 by Scott Wilson and Don Hill

APPENDIX B:
FELONY STATE CHARGES FOR
SODOMY AND “CRIME AGAINST NATURE”
IN OKLAHOMA COUNTY, OKLAHOMA,
1889-1969

State v. Anderson King
Case #4663, filed 1st July 1920
Crime against nature---sex with Jesse Harris, possibly a minor
Guilty: 2 year sentence

State v. Anderson King
Case #4669, filed 4 Aug 1920
Crime against nature---“sexual copulation” with Edgar Blackwell
Case dismissed (see above case)

State v. Ruben Lawson
Case #4802, filed Feb 1921
Crime against nature---did “carnally know” Will Peters, a 14-year-old boy
Pled guilty: 2 years sentence

State v. Archie Wilson and Blaine Hathaway
Case #5396, filed May 1923
Sodomy, crime against nature---“unnatural copulation, one with the other”
Guilty: Wilson received 5 years and Hathaway received 10 years

State v. R.C. Guy
Case #5893, filed 18th Feb 1925
Sodomy against Robert Voerster, a minor
Case apparently dismissed (see next case)

State v. R.C. Guy
Case #5894, filed 28 May 1925
Attempted rape---against Jewel Wehran, a nine-year-old girl
Guilty: 7 ½ year sentence

State v. Charles “Speedy” Brown
Case #6254 Filed December 1926
“Crime against nature”---against Fannie Donaldson
Plead guilty: 3 year sentence

State v. Fannie Donaldson
Case #6258 Filed 1927
“Crime against nature”---allowed Charles “Speedy” Brown to commit sodomy
Case dismissed

State v. Ed Woods
Case #6421, filed 6 April 1927
Crime against nature---against Ellis Meeks, and 11 year old boy
Guilty: 3 year sentence

State v. Arly Holman, a/k/a Frank Williams
Case #6589, filed October 1927
Sodomy against Franklin Dunn, a five year old boy
Unknown verdict---incomplete file

State v. E.H. Felder
Case #6803, filed July 1928
Sodomy with a bulldog
Guilty: 15 month sentence

State v. Roy W. Goodman
Case #7179, filed 9th July 1929
Sodomy against Laura May Jackson Goodman
Incomplete file

State v. D. Johnson
Case #7461, filed June 1930
Crime against nature involving G. Henry Dismuke
Not guilty

State v. Arlie Holman
Case #8685, filed 16th May 1932
Crime against nature against Francis Brooks, a nine year old boy
Guilty: 10 year sentence

State v. Al Bumbrey
Case #8717, 8718, and 8719, filed 25th June 1932
Sodomy against DeWitt Stevenson, Charles Elliot, and Frank Johnson
Guilty: 3 concurrent 10 year sentences

State v. Fred Ackerman
Case #8864, #8865, filed September 1932
Sodomy against Charlotte and Blanche Ackerman, his daughters
Pled guilty: 2 concurrent 10 year sentences

State v. Henry Sollers
Case # 9249, filed 9th July 1933
Oral sodomy with 9-year-old girl
Incomplete file

State v. Jimmie Payne and John Doe
Case #9351, filed 18 September 1933
Attempted sodomy against Tom Treadwell
Guilty: 5 year sentence

State v. Jack Cloud
Case #9477, filed 25 Jan 1934
Crime against nature against Edward Chambers
Case dismissed: witness refused to prosecute

State v. Harvey Keele
Case #9974, filed January 1935
Crime against nature with Eugene Reeves, a minor
Guilty: 5 year sentence

State v. Gaylon Walley
Case #10946, filed July 1936
Sodomy against Paul Brown
Guilty: 4 year sentence

State v. Earl Atkins
Case #10996, filed August 1936
Sodomy against Mary Catherine Pierce
Guilty: 7 year sentence

State v. Blackie Johnson
Case #11159, filed 11 November 1936
Sodomy against Raymond Alsup, a minor
Pled guilty: 3 year sentence

State v. Leonard Turpin
Case #11552, filed June 1937
Sodomy against Robert Hicks, a minor
5 year sentence

State v. Charles Purdum
Case #11553, filed June 1937
Sodomy against Robert Hicks
Case dismissed in 1941: witness refused to testify

State v. Grady Essex
Case #11558, filed June 1937
Sodomy, intercourse with a dog
Guilty: 18 month sentence

State v. Earl Nichols
Case #11614, filed August 1937
Sodomy against Lawrence Crawford
Guilty: 2 ½ year sentence

State v. Ralph Miller
Case #11723, filed September 1937
Sodomy against Vina Yousey
Guilty: 10 year sentence

State v. Fred L. Loyd
Case #11737, filed 24 September 1937
Sodomy with Carl Musser
Guilty: 5 year sentence

State v. Virgil Moore
Case #11796, filed 1 Nov 1937
Sodomy against Esther Fleming
Guilty: 5 year sentence

State v. John Clyde Roark
Case #11899, filed December 1937
Sodomy against Junior West
Pled guilty: 2 year sentence

State v. Arthur Yates
Case #12384, filed 1938
Sodomy against Dorothy Yates, his daughter
Guilty: 7 year sentence

State v. A.C. Walker
Case #12620, filed September 1938
Sodomy with Freddie Floyd, a minor
Guilty: 1 year sentence

State v. Rex Fay Greenlee
Case #12702, filed October 1938
Sodomy with Griggs Hunt, a minor
Guilty: 5 year sentence

State v. T.J. Cleveland
Case #12816 and 12817, filed November 1938
Sodomy against Dorothy Cramer and LaJawanna Bryant
Guilty: 2 concurrent 10 year sentences

State v. J.A. Lynn
Case #12902, filed November 1938
Sodomy against LaJawanna Bryant
Incomplete file

State v. Tom Marsh, Jr.
Case #13424, filed 7th August 1939
Sodomy against Floyd Andrew Johnson
Found guilty: 5 year sentence

State v. Ruben Lee Paschal
Case #13561, filed 21 August 1939
Sodomy against Kenneth Ray Hopper, a minor
Found guilty: 1 year sentence

State v. Ray B. Lewis (428 NW 13th)
Guilty of attempted sodomy, July 1943

State v. Jessie Curry (620 NE 1st)
Case # 16883, book 43, page 83, filed September 1944
Sodomy with Edgar M. Cherry
Case dismissed: witness refused to prosecute

State v. Harvey Walter Keel
Case # 17020, book 43, page 220, Filed August 1944 (2nd offense)
Sodomy against Paul Frances Picard, a 14 year old boy.
Incomplete file

State v. William Herman Beckham
Case #17167, book 43, page 367. Filed May/June 1945
Crime against nature after former felony conviction, against Billie Hutchens
Guilty: 10 year sentence

State v. Lewis Calvin Jackson
Case #18690, book 46, page 90. Trial started 7 April 1948.
Sodomy against Delbert B. Smith
Guilty: 2 year sentence

State v. Robert Forest Ervin
Case #18805, book 46, page 205. Filed June 1948.
Crime against nature against Donald Edward and William Leroy Wilson, minor brothers

Guilty: 10 year sentence

State v. Cleveland Doss Woody
Case #19639, book 47, page 439, filed February 1950.
Crime against nature on Herbert Hopkins
Guilty: 5 year sentence

State v. Ernest William Fisher
Case #20579, book 49, page 179.
Trial started 5 October 1951

State v. Wilburn A. Berryman
Case #22102 and 22103, book 51, pages 502-503. Trial started Sept 29, 1953
Sodomy against Jack Eugene Lacefield and James Lester Johnson
Guilty: 5 year sentence

State v. Richard L. Webster
Case #24802, book 56, page 202. Trial started 20 Dec 1957.
Sodomy against/with Duard Graves
Guilty: 2 year suspended sentence

State v. Harry Eugene Turner
Case #35123 (common pleas), filed June 1966
Engaging in an act of Lewdness
Trial started June 6, 1966---incomplete file

State v. Ralph Marshall Burnworth (Burnsworth)
Case #36125 (common pleas), filed January 1967
Engaging in an act of lewdness
Guilty: six month suspended sentence and costs

State v. Charles McFarland
Case #CRF-69-1166, filed May 1969
Oral sodomy with Mark Collins
Incomplete file

State v. Charles John Harford and David Allen Martin
Case #37446 (common pleas), filed December 28, 1967
Engaging in act of lewdness
Incomplete file

APPENDIX C:

Oklahoma County Felony Court Records Manually Checked for Sodomy Cases

Case by Case Check

YEARS	CASE NUMBER RANGE
1911-1912	3191-3244, 3304-3318
1913-1916	3410-3442, 3500-3510, 3589-4005
1917-1921	4006-4137, 4272-5133, 4600-4699, 4982-5049
1922-1924	5293-5604, 5500-5700
1924-1925	5811-6087
1927-1930	6382-7748
1930-1931	7908-7990, 8059-8325
1931-1932	8326-8999
1933-1935	9000-9157, 9200-9401, 9461-9490

These are Oklahoma County felony court records, from both the common pleas and district courts, located at the Oklahoma Historical Society Archives, Warehouse Division. They were donated to the archives in late 2003 and are the only surviving records of court proceedings from the period. These records are not indexed, nor are they catalogued in any meaningful way. They are simply stored in archival grade boxes, with case numbers facing upward. The felony docket books, which are still located at the Oklahoma County courthouse, list the particulars of every trial held since 1889, such as the date it began, name of defendant(s), and the case number. The charges against the defendants are not listed, however. A manual search is necessary to find particular classes of cases, such as “sodomy” or “crime against nature.” Records at the Oklahoma County Courthouse are not open for public perusal, so the records located at the Oklahoma Historical Society represent the only record cache available for research on a case by case basis.

OKLAHOMA COUNTY CRIMINAL APPEARANCE DOCKET BOOKS, MANUAL SEARCH

Miscellaneous

Book 5	Cases 3001-3599	(1938-1939)---common pleas
Book 6	Cases 2703-3022	(1911-1912)---county justice court
Book 7	Cases 3023-3344	(1912-1913)---county justice court
Book 10	Cases 3995-4312	(1915-1916)---county justice court

Pre-Statehood

Book 4	Cases 1-633	(1890-1898)
Book 5	Cases 471-936	(June 1894-Sept. 1901)
Book 6	Cases 943-1340	(Sept. 1901-Oct. 1904)
Book 7	Cases 1342-1746	(Oct.1904-May1906)

Post-Statehood

Book 8	Cases 1747-2000	(1906-1907)
Book 9	Cases 2111-2354	(1907-1908)
Book 10	Cases 2413-2831	(1908-1910)
Book 11	Cases 2832-3142	(1910-1911)
Book 12	Cases 3143-3454	(1911-1912)
Book 13	Cases 3455-3753	(10/1912-4/1915)
Book 14	Cases 3754-4073	(1915-1916)
Book 15	Cases 4074-4381	(1917-1919)
Book 16	Cases 4382-4691	(1919-1921)
Book 17	Cases 4693-4999	(1921-1922)
Book 18	Cases 5000-5313	(1922-March 1923)
Book 19	Cases 5314-5615	(Feb.1923-Jan.1924)
Book 20	Cases 5616-5919	(1924-1924)
Book 21	Missing Book	
Book 22	Cases 6231-6549	(Aug.1926-Oct.1927)
Book 23	Cases 6550-6870	(Oct.1927-Nov.1928)
Book 24	Cases 6871-7190	(Nov.1928-Aug.1929)
Book 25	Cases 7201-7500	(Aug.1929-Mar.1930)
Book 26	Cases 7501-7815	(Mar.1930-Nov.1930)
Book 27	Cases 7816-8115	(Nov.1930-Apr.1931)
Book 28	Cases 8116-8415	(1931-1931)
Book 29	Cases 8416-9014	(Nov.1931-Feb.1933)
Book 30	Cases 9015-9615	(Mar.1933-May1934)
Book 31	Cases 9616-10215	(May 1934-May 1935)
Book 32	Cases 10216-10808	(May 1935-May 1936)
Book 33	Cases 10815-11400	(May 1936-April 1937)
Book 34	Cases 11401-12000	(April 1937-Feb.1938)
Book 35	Cases 12001-12600	(Feb.1938-Sept.1938)

Book 36	Cases 12601-13200	(Sept.1938-1939)
Book 37	Cases 13201-13800	(1939-1940)

A manual check of these books yielded a number of cases charging sodomy, or crime against nature. Most of the charges were listed beside the case number, which allowed for a very complete search for some years, but not all of the books were as complete. The diligence of the clerk determined how much information was included in the docket books. In addition, the books are not numbered in a consistent fashion, due in part to the multiple overlapping authorities in Oklahoma before statehood in 1907. Because court jurisdictions changed, cases formerly considered felonies and heard before Oklahoma County judges could also be heard in common pleas court before a justice of the peace. A separate system of case docket books were generated for these cases, called common pleas books, and the common pleas courts docketed 3 or 4 cases to every single County felony case.

APPENDIX D:
Demographics of Interview Participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Race	Occupation	Married/Children
#1	M	73	W	Hairdresser	None
#2	M	71	W	Architect	Both
#3	M	81	W	Nurse	None
#4	M	77	W	Educator	Both
#5	M	75	W	Rancher	None
#6	M	74	W	Entertainer	None
#7	M	58	W	Entertainer	None
#8	M	74	W	Accountant	None
#9	M	50	W	Entertainer	Both
#10	M	78	W	Hairdresser	Both
#11	F	65	W	Bartender	N/A
#12	M	63	W	Hairdresser	Married
#13	M	61	W	Aerospace	Married
#14	M	74	W	Attorney	Both
#15	M	38	W	Entertainer	None
#16	M	58	H	Mechanic	None
#17	M	65	W	Contractor	Both
#18	M	70	W	Educator	Both
#19	M	25	W	Grad Student	None
#20	M	58	W	Activist	None
#21	M	55	W	Lobbyist	None
#22	M	60	W	Artist	None
#23	F	75	W	Entertainer	N/A
#24	M	NA	W	Medical	N/A
#25	M	55	W	Journalist	None
#26	F	60	W	Medical	Both
#27	M	48	W	Activist	None
#28	F	67	W	Medical	Both
#29	F	NA	W	Medical	N/A
#30	M	50	W	Psychology	Both
#31	M	63	W	Civil Servant	None

APPENDIX E:
INTERVIEW SCRIPT/QUESTIONNAIRE

PERSONAL DATA: The level of anonymity is strictly up to the participant. If you wish, refer to yourself with a pseudonym and alter any personal data accordingly to retain anonymity. Your identity is not required to participate in this project.

Name/Pseudonym:

Date of Interview:

Age:

Occupation:

How long a resident of Oklahoma City?

****** Personal Stuff ******

Would you classify yourself as homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual for most of your adult life?

If homosexual/bisexual, how long have you been “out”? When did you have your first homosexual experience?

Did your sexual preference create problems for you or between you and your family? Employment issues? Neighborhood issues?

Did/do you have a strong network of gay friends and/or acquaintances?

How did these relationships develop? When/how did you realize that there were others that shared your sexual preference?

How visible were you and your friends in the community? Did you ever encounter prejudice on the part of the police, government officials, etc.? What kind of

relationships did you and your fiends have with the police, religious authorities, district attorneys, etc.?

What were the limits of “acceptable” public behavior and how were the norms enforced?

****** Community ******

How did one know if somebody was homosexual in the 1920s/1930s/1940s/1950s in Oklahoma City? Were there any distinctive attitudes, fashions, language, or occupations that seemed to resonate with your homosexual friends than other groups?

How did you keep in touch with current events relating to your homosexuality? Any underground newspapers or newsletters?

Where did you and your friends hang out? Any particular areas, establishments, neighborhoods, parks, homes, or other places that were popular?

What about bars and honkey-tonks? Any of them exclusively cater to gay/bisexual men/women? If so, where were they located and what were they called? What was the first truly “gay” bar in OKC?

- A) Bishop’s Tap Room
- B) Mayflower
- C) Sweet Leona’s
- D) Club Burgundy
- E) Manhattan, It’ll Do Club
- F) Mirror Lounge
- G) Inferno

Were there ever any galas, socials, or “drag balls” in the Oklahoma City area that you heard about or attended? Explain...

Any noticeable class differences between poorer and middle class gay men?

Describe differences in attitudes regarding monogamy in gay world, then and now. Any class-based differences?

Any pictures or memorabilia you might like to share?

What impact did events like WWI, WWII, the Great Depression, or the tumultuous 1950s have on your lifestyle, friendships, socializing patterns, etc. Any discernible turning points in the acceptance/mortification of homosexuality that you can remember?

- a. What was your military experience like? Stats?
- b. Were you “out”? Others?

Describe any distinctive examples of prejudice or violence you encountered in Oklahoma City, 1889-1950, that stemmed from your sexual preference?

Any differences between local police, county officials, or state officials to gay men?

W H:

- a) George Shirk
- b) District attorney's or sheriffs that were friendly?

Any particular time when things got noticeably more uncomfortable in OKC for gay men?

Was Oklahoma City any less tolerant of homosexuality than other places you lived/visited? Moreso perhaps? How did the city change over time? Any discernible turning points? Discuss...

Was it easier being gay then than it is now? Explain...

**** Sex ****

Let's talk about sex---where did gay/bisexual men in Oklahoma City go if they wanted to have a sexual experience? Anonymous sex?

Was it easy to have a sexual encounter in Oklahoma City? Were the police or community groups ever problematic in allowing these to occur?

What are some of the most notorious or memorable sexual encounters you have personally had in Oklahoma City?

Was there ever any homosexual-heterosexual contact of which you remember? How were the “straight” men viewed by the community? Any prejudice or negative ramifications?

***** Impersonation *****

What do you know about the history of female impersonation in OKC?

When did you first dress in drag?

What led you to do this? Anybody “lead” you to it, or did it just occur naturally?

Where would one go in the 1940s/1950s/1960s to do shows? Any notorious drag bars/clubs? Private parties?

Were they high profile affairs? High profile people?

Did drag assume a large role in the gay community---was it a central aspect of socialization, a humorous escapade, a means to make a living? Explain.

Impressions/remembrances of:

Tony Sinclair
Arnold Lee
Ginger Lamarr
Misc. people?

****** Bars ******

How many bars have you owned? Names, dates, etc.

Were they always “gay,” or did you cultivate mixed crowds?

Lucrative business?

Did you face a lot of community pressure, police pressure, familial pressure in regard to starting/running a bar?

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Monday, August 16, 2004

IRB Application No AS0511

Proposal Title: The Emergence and Evolution of the Gay Male Subculture in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1889-2000

Reviewed and
Processed as: Expedited

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

Protocol Expires: 8/15/2005

Principal
Investigator(s):

Aaron L. Bachhofer
17601 E. Memorial
Luther, OK 73054

Laura Belmonte
501 LSW
Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

☒ The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact me in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-1676, colson@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Carol Olson, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Aaron Lee Bachhofer, II

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Thesis: THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE GAY AND
BISEXUAL MALE SUBCULTURE IN OKLAHOMA CITY,
OKLAHOMA, 1889-2005

Major Field: American History

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born on December 18, 1969, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Education: Graduated from Luther High School, Luther, Oklahoma, in 1988.
Received a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and Political Science from
Oklahoma City University in 1992. Received a Master of Arts degree in
Southwestern Studies from the University of Central Oklahoma in 1996.
Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in
History at Oklahoma State University in May 2006.

Experience: History and Government Instructor, U.S. Grant High School,
Oklahoma City, 2005. Adjunct Professor in American History, Oklahoma
City University, 1996-1998. History and Government Instructor,
Millwood High School, 1994. Electrical apprentice, journeyman, and
contractor with State Electrical Contractors, Inc., 1986-2006.

Professional Memberships: Oklahoma Historical Society, Western History
Association, American Historical Association, Oklahoma Teachers
Association.

Name: Aaron Lee Bachhofer, II

Date of Degree: May 2006

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF THE GAY AND
BISEXUAL MALE SUBCULTURE IN OKLAHOMA CITY,
OKLAHOMA, 1889-2005

Pages in Study: 397

Candidate for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major Field: American History

Scope and Method of Study: This dissertation traces the development of the gay and bisexual male subculture in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 1889-2005. Utilizing a variety of primary materials -- newspapers, sodomy court records, personal interviews, and census records -- the author reconstructed the social and sexual lives of gay and bisexual residents. Further, a comparison between Oklahoma City's queer subculture and those found in larger metropolitan areas was made throughout to test the validity of assumptions regarding the roles played by geography, urbanization, World War II, and Civil Rights-era protests on the growth of gay and bisexual subcultures.

Findings and Conclusions: Research indicated that a diverse gay and bisexual world existed in Oklahoma City with roots that extended back before World War II. That subculture included well-known spots for sex and socialization, openly-gay residents, and it operated rather openly until the late 1950s. At that juncture, a sundry of factors—the end of state-mandated prohibition, public outcries over vice, and the election of a homophobic county attorney---allowed authorities to pursue vice more fervently, and it forced many gay and bisexual men back into the closet. Although Oklahoma City did not have a “Stonewall” moment, political activism was not absent in the 1970s and 1980s. Serious grass-roots politicization occurred in response to an Oklahoma legislator's attempt to deny homosexuals the right to teach in public schools, to combat police brutality, and to fight AIDS. Yet recent events, such as Oklahoma's prohibition against same-sex marriage, adoptions, and any antidiscrimination measures that local governments might enact, overshadowed that tradition of activism. This represents a fundamental weakness in the gay and bisexual Oklahoma City community---an unwillingness to meet macro-issues affecting homosexuals across the United States---and it stems from the openness that subculture enjoyed into the 1950s

ADVISOR'S APPROVAL: Laura A. Belmonte